

Don't worry anymore child by TheGirlWhoWait

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Summary:

The new girl, the Sheriff's niece, was what she was to all of Hawkins. Almost every night she dreamed of a nice freckled boy (for whom she had a secret Platonic passion) and a man with cold blue eyes. No one needed to know about dreams, they would find it strange.

El was back, but not the way Mike Wheeler expected. She did not know who he was and, in fact, she did not even know who she was.

1. prologue

Author's Note:

I apologize in advance if there is any mistake in writing, English is not my native language (I would say that far from it, in fact) and so it will not be rare at times where mistakes will be seen here. I'm sorry about that, really. But if you decide to stay here, to see where all this is going to ... well, I thank you immensely.

"Here, princess, a welcome gift."

The bright-eyed girl forgot her acknowledgment and promptly accepted the package she was given, and with obvious ferocity and excitement shredded the pink wrapping to reveal a ornate lilac notebook. She embraced the present and pressed it against her as if that object were the thing she most desired in her life.

"Thanks Uncle. That's very kind of you to give me that."

The tall brown-haired man smiled fondly and returned the affectionate act as the girl embraced him. She was so small and had suffered so much. The thump of losing parents had been one of many in the life of the young girl.

"Do not you want to meet your new room?" He asked in a sober voice.

The smile on her lips was the best answer she could have given.

"Climbing the stairs is the second room on the right. One tip: it's the room that has your name written on the door."

With a shriek of delight, the girl, still clinging to the gift she had just won, ran to the second floor of the house in search of her new room. The man was still halfway up the steps, both hands occupied with his niece's luggage, when the girl reappeared. Her eyes were shining in pure wild excitement.

"Uncleee," She hummed. "My room is soo beautiful! Come on! Let me help you with these bags so you can see my room."

The suitcase was taken from the man's hand with surprising ease. What did the girl's parents come to feed her?

"Come on, dude! Move faster!"

He arched his blues eyes at the back of the young woman who was leading him inside the house where he had lived the last four years of his life. But what could be done besides following her? He didn't have the guts enough to discourage her or, as he watched the girl's bedroom, tell her he knew the place where he had been decorating the place himself.

He leaned against the doorframe as the girl jumped over the bed with an energy that only children of her age had. Except that, that girl was noticeably more agitated than any other child. Or not? Or was he just thinking about being totally inexperienced with children? Yeah, that was it.

How could he care for her if he could barely take care of himself? He was terrified that he was again responsible for a life. What if he failed as he had last time?

"Did you like your new room?"

"Did I like it? I loved it, Uncle! It's so beautiful, so big, and so ... so cool that I have no more words to describe how much I enjoyed it!"

She laughed as the way only one girl had expressed herself.

"Yes, 'cool' is the right word to use." He cleared her throat. "And then? Anxious to start studying at the city school?"

"Very anxious, uncle." She grimaced as she jumped on the bed, her short curly hair turning into a brown trail marking the path the mistress had been making. "Do you think they'll like me? Y-you, you know, because of ... this." She pointed to the large dark frame she kept on her face.

The man frowned.

"It's just a glasses, it's not or it makes you an abomination of nature."

"Well, the kids in my old school liked to laugh at me over those glasses." She fell on the bed. "I don't want them to laugh at me, uncle. If they laugh at me I swear I... I..."

He walked over to the delicate-faced girl and then sat down next to her, his eyes fixed on the small clenched fists.

"The kids in your old school were a bunch of petty idiots who didn't understand how much they were losing by treating you that way." She hesitated, then ran her hand over the youngest brown tresses. "The people here from Hawkins are cozy, don't worry about that, because I'm sure you'll soon make friends with some nice boys and girls. But if they think of bullying you, don't let them be okay? You can go complain to a teacher, come and talk to me or..."

"Can I punch the bastard in the face?" A faint determination determined the tone of the chestnut.

He shook his head, remembering that a really responsible person would berate the girl for speaking low-level words and threatening to punch the face of anyone who annoyed her. But what could he do? Tell her to let them piss her off because they had a reputation to watch over? No, that was not him, in fact, he was damning himself for the reputation - not very good - he had in that city egg.

"Do you at least know how to punch?"

She put her chin on her palm, pensive.

"I don't think so, uncle." A reflexive pause where he already knew what would follow. "You could teach me?"

"Here, give me your hand." He took one of the girl's hands and closed it, taking the strict care of leaving her thumb under the other fingers. "Never, under any circumstances, leave your thumb exposed or above your fingers; This leaves him vulnerable and easy to break, both by the impact and to the aggressor who wants to revoke the act. Take the distance and flex this thin arm well." He waved her arm to demonstrate what he was saying. He was not a thin member, in fact,

but he could not miss the opportunity to tease her. "Use all your strength and hit the idiot's face. And then, future boxer, now that you know how to take a perfect punch, what about telling me to go out to dinner tonight? The restaurant I have in mind serves a delicious steak with chips."

"I love French fries!" She shouted so loudly that the man was quite certain that anyone who had passed outside the house had heard it clearly. "Can we order a portion for the trip?"

He pretended to think about it, never really thinking of denying the request that had been made so sweetly. Ever since she had met this girl, she had seldom denied anything to her, and in the few times she had done it, she had felt a man utterly devoid of heart.

"Of course you can, but before we go, I need to do something very important ... COCKS ATTACK!"

"NO, UNCLE!" She tried to keep a distance that would keep her safe.

"Yes! No mercy for Sophie Eileen!"

2. The personification of my dreams

Summary for the Chapter:

How to forget the color of the eyes of your first love? How could he forget the pain of losing him and having his heart shattered into a thousand pieces as if he were made of the most vague vitreous material? Mike Wheeler had no idea how to do it, and he did not want to. She had been his first love and he was sure it was hers.

He still had a lifetime along the way and moving on was more than essential. It was essential, but extremely difficult when you had the clone of your first love sitting in the wallet next to yours and stating / demonstrating in each act that it was not who he was looking for.

Sophie Eileen was not Eleven.

Or was it? He had to find out, and if he did not, his nerd's friends would.

Nancy was watching him, that was an undeniable fact. What motivated her to do this was an arduous unknown since in recent months she had not embarrassed her before her boyfriend or invaded the room of the same.

He fixed his eyes on the black coffee he had been drinking. It was bitter, his mother had probably been distracted when he added the amount of sugar needed to drink. He set aside the hot black liquid and went to the cereal in the form of letters of the alphabet. He already knew how to read, that was remarkable, so that clearly was not intended for him, but the little sister who was learning to deal correctly with letters and numeric figures.

“Look, Mike, this is the letter H!”

He blinked, shocked, when a pink spoon was tucked under his nose. He moved away from the object, not wanting edible, milk-drenched letters to stain him.

"Yes, Holly, that's the letter H." He pulled the spoon close to him and guided her to his younger sister's already open mouth. "Now try searching for the letter Z."

The little blonde stared at the bowl with a frown, confused at the request of the only boy in the Wheeler family.

"Z? I have not yet learned this letter," He hesitated. "That's a letter, is not it?"

"It's a letter, Holl's. Look for the zig-zig letter that will be her."

He looked away at the coffee. His mother had encouraged him (Reads orderly) to help his younger sister with her intellectual advances. According to her, Mike was an excellent and patient teacher. From where she had taken this he would never know. I had never taught anyone other than Dustin or Elev...

"And then, Michael." He looked up from the bowl of cereal to find the one who was addressing him. Holly was busy searching for letters, Nancy would not open her mouth in front of her parents' presence and Karen was immersed in her own world, so there was only ... "Do you look at some girl at school?"

"No one" And in fact there was no girl who captivated him or who dared to approach him without looking like a dead opossum by the side of the road. The only girl who had done that had no hair at the time and now he was not even sure she was alive. "No one, father."

The uninterested tone made the thirty-something man take a deep breath in search of patience. He'd always thought his son's teenage years would be easy to deal with, but apparently he'd been wrong all along. The boy was harder than expected.

"Not even your fire-haired friend?" Do not you think she's beautiful?

Max did not count as a girl, that's what Lucas liked to say shortly after being punched by it. But she was a girl, and did not do anything

to Mike beyond the raw feeling of friendship. The redhead did not exercise the same power that Eleven had exercised over him, not from afar.

"She's just my friend, Dad." He answered and then sought the only salvation he had: his mother. "Mom, just out of curiosity, is Dustin sick? Yesterday I inadvertently listened to you on the phone with his mother."

Karen Wheeler turned one last time to the pancakes she had been making with a demeanor and talent worthy of a five-star restaurant owner, and then, faced with the question of the only son she had, she spun under her heels so she could get a glimpse of the boy and The rest of his family.

"Have you been eavesdropping on me, Michael?"

He did not hesitate to retort a firm "no!" Which was soon overturned by the reverberant "YES" that Holly Wheeler released with joy. Idiot, that was what he had been in taking Holly to spy on the conversation between his mother and Dustin. He made a mental note never to include Holly in the future plans he would put into action, even if she made a face of crying and threatening to tell an adult. If he included it on the plane, he would not shut her up, why would it exclude her? Anyway he would be delivered.

"I was going to my room when I heard part of the conversation, Mom. It was very fast, you understand? Of course he would not snoop around, that would be a clear invasion of privacy." He brushed the hair out of his eyes. "But what then? Is Dustin sick?"

The older blonde looked at her son, not believing a single word.

"Your friend is in iron health." She poured a plateful of appetizing pancakes into the center of the table where anyone could serve. "We were talking about Sheriff Hopper." She took the table. "Yesterday they saw him and his niece, a lovely little girl of your age, dining at The Best of Hawkins. Apparently, the girl is under full responsibility of Sheriff Hopper. It's a mystery why he brought her here, I mean, why would a girl choose to live with her biological parents to live with her uncle?"

There was not a person to answer Karen's questioning and there would not be so soon. It was no secret that everyone in town would give anything to know more about the life of "mysterious" Sheriff Jim Hopper. The only thing people knew about the man who took care of his safety was that he had come from a city ten times the size of Hawkins, who was alone and now knew that he had some brother or sister who had given him a niece.

Mike, who had acquired a certain respect for the man carrying a sheriff's golden star in his chest, found this completely unnecessary. What's the sense of the locals hanging on to the detectives about Hopper's personal life when they could be taking care of their own lives? The man was reserved, and what? He was a different person, there was no problem in that.

"Michael." His father made another attempt to start a conversation. "I'm going to ask you something, and I want you to be honest with me." Remember, I'm your father: You can tell me everything."

"You may ask, Father." He nodded absently to build a mental image of the Sheriff's niece. Did the girl look like her uncle? She shuddered at the thought of a tall, thick-voiced, bearded girl.

A moment of hesitation and then the question that had left Patriarch Wheeler sleepy at night.

"Michael ... you like girls, right?"

That question had really taken longer than expected. Oh, yes, he'd been waiting for it ever since Lonnie had questioned Will about his sexual choice. He had been prepared two years and five months.

"*Theodore Wheeler*" Karen Wheeler's sharp voice made itself heard by everyone in the house. "I refuse to believe you're asking such a question for our son ..."

"I like it, Dad, I like girls," He rose from the table with calculated calm, with no desire to raise a war in the house with any exaggerated reaction. "I just do not like the girls in this town. And they do not even like me except to ask for the test answer, " He added, joining the green backpack he kept on the floor. "Do not worry so much, Father,

before college I think I can get a girlfriend to prove my gigantic manhood. I have to go, Mother, I'm already late." Kissed her mother's cheek and then left.

He strode slowly out of the house, lightly tapping the door behind him. He was not late, so he sat next to the bike in the garage and waited for the time to leave. From where he sat he could still hear his father's grunts at his mother, Nancy and Holly, of course, kept silent. *"What's going on with this kid, Karen? Whatever it is, I will not tolerate reprisals inside that house!"*

Reprisals? Reprisals?! He had not retaliated, just answered what his father was asking. She had not even raised her voice as she spoke or knocked on the door. He had done nothing disrespectful.

"Mike." He fell back on the garage floor, defeated by Nancy's appearance there. All he least needed at the moment was her accusing him of something he had not done. "I thought you were late."

If she'd known that Nancy would soon finish drinking, he certainly would not have stayed in the garage. Now she would have to talk to her that since her professional life she had been working as a family psychologist.

"I thought I could be alone," He mumbled more to himself than to the sandy-haired one. "What do you want, Nancy? Look, I did not get anything from your room, okay?"

"I know you did not, Mike." And then Nancy, dressed in her finest robes, sat down beside him. "Want to talk about what happened in there?"

"I do not want to." She laid her head on the hard floor. "Nancy, how were things after I left?"

The light-eyed young woman hesitated a little, then replied.

"Bullshit, Mike, really bad. Dad pretended that the question he asked was completely natural and Mama kept giving Holly cereal as she glared at him." Mike glanced at the phrase in his mind. "You're old

enough to know their odds are far too high."

"They're tall, but they're not going to happen. There's Holly and a breakup could make her traumatized. They would do nothing so they could traumatize Holly." Nancy looked at him as if this was the first time she had seen him for a long time, which was illogical since they had lived in the same house since Mike's birth. "What's it? I already knew it. I think even Holly knows, even if she does not fully understand."

Nancy's lips tightened, uncertain as to how to proceed.

"If that happens, Mike, know I'm here, okay? You can count on me for whatever you need. I am your big sister and I will support you in any situation." He combed the younger brother's black wires out of his face. "Last year, with all that happened, when I saw the way Jonathan looked for his brother, I realized I would do the same for you, but I was not demonstrating that."

There was a time when Mike had longed for Jonathan Byers to be his older brother and not Nancy, it was an idiotic wish, he knew, and so he had not shared it with anyone. Today he regretted what he had wanted, things were what they were. Will had Jonathan as his older brother and he had Nancy and was grateful for it.

"If, by any chance, they split up, Mike, I will not let them separate us either. It's going to be me, you and Holly. Soon I'll be reaching the age, you know, and if I have to, I'll get a job, rent a house, and take you and Holly to live well away from it all." Mike traced imaginary drawings on the floor. "You would live with me?"

Living with Nancy ... That would mean being away from his parents, the constant fights that were not seen, but what happened when the curtains came down. Why would a girl choose to live with her biological parents and move in with her uncle? I remembered what her mother had asked earlier. Here was an answer: maybe the girl's parents were fighting.

"Would go, Nancy." He said promptly.

The light-eyed one nodded solemnly, relieved at the answer. For a

moment, a brief moment, he had waited for a "no" from his brother, but apparently he could no longer live in the midst of Ted and Karen's silent war.

"WHEELER! IT'S TIME TO LEAVE YOUR TOUCH AND GO TO SCHOOL!"

In synchrony, the thirteen-year-old's head turned around to find a red-haired girl in the garage doorway who stared at them with unflinching interest.

"It's good to know that, Mike." He let his brother stand up and then lay on a wet kiss on his pale cheek. "Good class and see you later."

She got on her bike and started to pedal to follow the red of her friend.

"Where is Lucas? He said he was going to school with us."

"He refused to go to school with me, I think he's still upset about the punch I gave him on his shoulder yesterday afternoon," She reflected without a trace of regret. "What was going on when I arrived?"

"Nancy and I were deciding on our future. College and more. Hey! Want to bet a race to school? The winner wins a box of chocolates."

He accelerated without waiting for an answer. The wind buzzed a song in the man's ears. It was as if the god Zephiro himself was singing a beautiful song for him as an incentive to win the race.

"ARGH! Are you really talking about it in front of me?"

The four boys rolled their eyes at the complaint and Mike was the only one to giggle as he did so. Max had been angry since losing the race for him.

"Go on, Will," he urged, walking alongside his friends. "She's just

being a bad loser."

"Bad loser, you son of a bitch! You stole that shit and you know it! But I do not want to hear the disgusting details of Byers's kiss with Myra." She narrowed her blue eyes at Mike. "You do not seem very interested either. The way you're acting, it looks like you've kissed a girl in your life."

The small group laughed and fell silent as Mike shrugged unabashedly, not wanting to reveal something of the sort in the middle of the hallway.

"You already kissed?" The redhead said, gaping. "Who?"

"Obviously, is not it?" Dustin laughed as if he had known that information a long time ago. "You do not have to be a genius to know who it was."

"Eleven" Will and Max, the only ones who did not know the girl who possessed superpowers, came out in perfect sync.

"Oh man! When happened?" Lucas asked with a look of someone who would beat his friend if he did not tell them all at that moment. "Why did not you tell us you kissed the weirdo?"

"You do not call her a weirdo, Lucas," he scolded in the best adult tone that could be used. "I just..."

That was not a good day. He should have noticed it when he fell and tapped his toe on the side of the bed when his father questioned him about his sexuality or when Nancy came to talk about a possible separation from her parents. But frankly, he was Mike Wheeler, the boy who liked Star Wars. It was routine for him to notice that it was not a good day for him to bump into someone and fall on his ass. His classic.

He gathered up the notebooks and books he'd dropped on the floor.

"Oh my God, I'm sorry!" I swear it was not intentional, really! An extra pair of hands began to help him gather the material from the floor. "I was distracted, I apologize for the incident."

He got up off the floor and then understood why his friends were silent.

"I'm new here, you see, I was looking for my room and I did not see it. Anyway, could any of you help me? Oh wait! First of all, I need to introduce myself ..." She held out his hand hoping that Mike would accept it as a cordiality from the first meeting between two people.

He froze in the place where he was, unable to reciprocate the smile or the friendly handshake the girl offered. The sight of the girl was making him breathless like never before. The heart was still as fast as the beating of a hummingbird's wings. Something inside him stirred and cried for attention he had not been receiving for a long time.

It was a dream and soon he would wake up in his bedroom as it had happened the last time.

Eleven. Breathing and live. She stood before him like an invading angel of sweet dreams.

"Much pleasure, my name is Sophie Eileen."

Or maybe it was a nightmare, a reminder of everything that had happened a year ago.

3. The Sheriff's Niece

Summary for the Chapter:

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He still had a lifetime along the way and moving on was more than essential. It was essential, but extremely difficult when you had the clone of your first love sitting in the wallet next to yours and stating / demonstrating in each act that it was not who he was looking for.

Sophie Eileen was not Eleven.

Or was it? He had to find out, and if he did not, his nerd's friends would.

Light brown hair, short and with small ripples at the ends, lightly tanned skin showing impeccable health, blue polka dot dress that marked the waist of a young girl about to blossom and bewitch boys with their natural beauty, worn jeans vest, All star black with a low barrel and a smile on the radiant face. This was Sophie Eileen or, as Mike had nicknamed her mentally, the copy of Eleven.

He shook his head, bewildered by what he saw, but still aware of the good manners he had learned from an early age, accepted the hand extended to him. He does not hear anything; Nothing close to the shock he'd always felt when he touched Eleven's hand. It was just his hand against that of the unknown girl.

That was definitely not El. Eleven would have recognized him the first time he'd set his brown eyes on him, she would not act so naturally when she found him again. That girl did not know him and rightly since she was the sheriff's niece, daughter of some relative of Jim Hopper. It was not El.

"You're Sheriff Hopper's niece," He commented for something that could confirm what was already evident in his mind. Color flooded the girl's golden cheeks. "We've heard about you."

Mike gathered all the strength he had to offer the girl the most insipid of smiles. He did not want to smile, not when the ghost of what El could have been was there smiling at him.

It was a joke of the universe and at that moment fully understood how Luke Skywalker felt at the end of Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back. Luke had always wished he had a father, and after years of living as an orphan in the care of his uncles, there was Darth Vader revealing that he was the father of the blond Skywalker. For the last few months, Mike had wanted Incessantly to get Eleven back from wherever he was. Eleven did not come back, but there, looking into his eyes, was a ghost of what the girl might have been if they had not made her a laboratory guinea pig.

"My uncle said that my arrival would not really be new" Jim Hopper knew things, that Wheeler had to admit. The girl sighed, her gaze falling on the books that Mike carried in his arms. "Really mourn for the incident, if there was anything that ..."

"Eleven!" Dustin stepped forward like a runaway car to arrest the girl (Sophie, he forced herself to remember) in a bone-crushing embrace. Dustin Henderson had always been the largest in his group in size (and fear, but this was not the case at the moment), however, having cleo-occult dysplasia, his passion for pudding, Dungeons & Dragons and his extremely friendly round face completely disqualified him Of the school's likely bully post. "Are you alive! This is so cool! Where have you been all this time? Why did not you come back sooner? Can you still make Troy pee in your pants? Can you try now, right now?"

"Weirdo!" Lucas exclaimed in admiration. The nickname does not pejoratively leave him; There was a recognizable timbre of affection that was present in the voice of thirteen. "You look like a real girl! You have hair and everything you have right! You're even dressing properly!"

Sophie turned away from the boy who crushed her with the most delicacy she could use in this situation. She was scared and, above

all, surprised. Those boys were hugging her as if they had known her a long time, one of them had said that now she looked like a real girl and ... And he had called her a weirdo.

“Excuse? Did you really just call me a weirdo?” She wanted to confirm what I had heard. Turned to the boy, outraged by his unpleasant nickname. Being known as "Sheriff Hopper's niece" was fine, but, coming to be nicknamed "weirdo", that she would not tolerate for anything in that world. "Look, I've already apologized to your friend for the incident, it's not necessary to be offended in this way.”

Mike laid a hand on Lucas's shoulder, seeking to appease his friend's high spirits as Will followed suit and did the same with Dustin taking care to leave him a reasonable distance from the Sheriff's niece.

The commotion was drawing the undesirable attention of those passing by. The malicious comments could already be heard with absurd clarity. "The weirdos are in the zone", "It's my impression or the frog face is more ridiculous than normal?", "Why is Max liable to walk with these losers? Should follow her brother's example and relate better ", " Why are they in the middle of the hall? ", " Idiots "... He could not identify who was speaking, the flow of students in the corridor prevented this, but he could see that the speaker wanted his comments heard . They always wanted that.

For a while, more specifically after Will's return, things had improved for them. But time had passed, the glow of it had slowly worn away until it was completely lost, as if it had never really existed; Some had forgotten and others abhorred the subject by calling the poor kid a freak. Will Byers, of a miracle, had become an aberration in the eyes of Hawkins' small population.

“Calm down, please calm down. He did not want to offend you "Will said, with kindness capable of comforting the worst of wild beasts. "It's just ..." And then he hesitated. Mike could almost see the gears working inside his friend's head. Will was thinking about how much he could trust the new girl. “Never mind. You said you were lost, right? Max, can you go with her to our office? We're going.”

The redhead opened her mouth, ready to retort a negative sprinkled

with low-level words. And then he held back. Max hated to be given orders, but most of all he hated to disturb a personal matter that did not involve her directly. She was a girl smart enough to notice that the four boys wanted to be alone. She was accustomed to that. "She had joined the group last, obviously she knew they would have secrets and conversations that did not involve her directly or indirectly.

"Come on, new girl! I'm Max and I'm going to take you to your new classroom." She grabbed the girl's arm, and together, Sophie being dragged and Max dragging, they disappeared into the whirlwind of teenagers attending Hawkins High School.

Will let the two girls back away enough to say,

"What in the name of Christ was that all?" He inquired impatiently.

Byers was not really nervous, just shocked at everything he had seen before his eyes. He was not used to seeing Dustin and Lucas losing and controlling and Mike ... That was the reaction that would definitely shock him the most. Wheeler had stood, staring at the girl as if she were the most beautiful sight of his life. Ever since his earliest childhood, Will had seen the brunet become as unresponsive as he had been before.

"It was Eleven." Dustin ignored the question, his finger pointed at Mike. The boy seemed about to lose his composure again. "You lived with her more, she lived in your basement; It was her, was not it, Mike?"

Mike Wheeler stepped back a few steps until he hit the cabinets, still numb.

"No," he murmured, his voice hoarse and shaken. Little Wheeler's eyes refused to meet the others. He did not want them to see the repressed tears he kept there. "It was not El. It was not this time she came back."

Come back from where? Where could she go back? They wanted to question Mike, but they knew this was an unknown response to him. For him and for anyone.

Of all, Mike was the one who most wanted Eleven's return. If only she had the confirmation that she was alive, that she was fine, he would be calmer. Just knowing that she breathed, they shared the same oxygen - He just needed it. Knowing that she was well would make him more composed and possessing an immense joy.

But the world was full of cruelties and he had no way of knowing that and the uncertainty was worse than any beating he could get from Troy and his henchmen.

He blinked rapidly, her dark eyes burning with the mere memory of the naïve girl who had been so often mistreated by life.

"Is everything okay, Mike?" Lucas Sinclair's voice now sounded uncertain and bland. "Dude?"

Everyone knew how painful it was for Mike to talk about the girl whose name was a number, double Mike's first crush. But who said that what he felt was a crush of passion? A mere crush would not be throbbing in a person's chest for more than three hundred and sixty-five days of the year, he would not be visiting him in memories of a quick week and of strong events or making him almost cry when he saw eggo's arranged before Yes.

No, nothing was right. His parents were a step away from separation, bad weather at home was unbearable, schoolmates constantly called him by evil nicknames (lately it had been shaking him more than usual) and Eleven was most likely dead. Absolutely nothing was alright.

"I'm fine." He pushed herself away from the cabinets as if she'd been shocked. "Let's go into the class, shall we?"

Three pairs of eyes stared at him in disbelief. Was he really lying so blatantly in their faces? Frankly, it was not like they were a bunch of dumb and dumb trolls.

"I'll be fine," He said a second time, this time changing the main verb of the sentence. "Are we going to the class or not?"

They walked in silence. Talking about it made everyone's moods

down. Even Will was discouraged. He had not gotten to know the girl, but he had heard everything about him; His personality was arrogant, naive and mildly sweet to Mike Wheeler, his powers of Jean Gray, his clumsiness, his complete adoration of food and preference not camouflaged by eggo's ... He knew everything.

He was grateful for everything the girl had done for the boys that week he had been in the inverted world-she had helped them enormously and if there was anything that could be done to help her, to take her away from wherever she was , He would do. Gratitude to Eleven would lead him to extremes. The gratitude and desire to see the friend return to being who he was before.

Mike Wheeler might be in love with Eleven, but he, Will, had an eternal debt with her.

Sophie Eileen, who had a lively conversation with Max as if they had been friends for a long time, fell silent as Mike and his friends entered the classroom to settle in next to each other. She seemed frightened by her closeness, as if she feared the previous scene would repeat itself again.

"Do you have something to say to Sophie?" Max glared at them. She rarely defended anyone, especially an unknown girl. "An apology maybe?"

Mike took a deep breath, as if sitting next to the girl was he who should start. And then it wilted like a watery plant when she found, behind the glasses of Sophie's glasses, a pair of big brown eyes. She's not El, she forced herself to remember. Being friends and living with that girl would be a huge blow to him.

"Look, we really regret everything that happened down the hall," he said with the utmost confidence he had. The possibility of the young woman with short tresses rejecting the apology was high. "We ended up confusing you with someone we liked a lot." *Which I like very much.*

"It's as if we're seeing El, our friend here in front of us," Dustin added, his eyes clear enough to become ten times his usual size. "You look a lot like her, you could even be a clone of her." You're not a clone, are

you?

"She's not a clone, idiot!" Will and Lucas, in a twinkle-twinkling twist, hit Dustin's head. "Shut up, Dustin!"

The girl tilted her head a little to the side, studying the four boys who had been talking to her so fervently, a smile rising on her pink lips. It was not a timid and slightly contented curvature such as Eleven had exhibited by admiring himself in the mirror of the Wheeler's house, that was a kind smile, with no trace of resentment. The excuses of RPG players had been accepted by Sheriff's niece Jim Hopper.

"I'm not the clone of your friend, and I'm so sorry she's not here. You like her a lot, that's visible." She hid a strand of chocolate hair behind his ear. There was something stuck to her wrist, a piece of floral cloth. Probably some feminine ornament that left the girls in a trance. "You know, if you want, I can be friends with you. I do not want to take her place, just ..."

Let the phrase die, his cheeks flushed with the possibility of rejection.

"Of course you can be our friend!" Dustin exclaimed. "Can you play Dungeon & Dragons?"

"I could learn."

"You could be an elf or a princess." Lucas opined. "What do you think, Mike?"

He gave her bony shoulders, not wanting to think.

"Because I think she could be very right." Dustin commented and then, without any warning, turned to give Max his tongue. "You lost the position of princess and elf, redhead!"

"I never wanted to be the princess or the damned elf of this stupid game; I wanted to see blood fight, wanted to be in the middle of the battle. But not! You had to put me to be one of those two ridiculous!"

A heated discussion began and Mike chose to remain neutral. This was unnecessary and a bit childish on the part of friends, but it was what defined them. Lucas and Dustin always engaged in constant

verbal fights Max while Will tried to put everything away. On a good day, Mike would have helped Will, but after everything that had happened in the early hours of that day ... well, he had no mood for anything.

"Is it so bad to be the princess or the elf?" Searched innocently. She looked at him warily, as if she were looking through the bark he would build to hide what she felt. "Do I need to wear some humiliating clothing?"

He thought of the clothes Nancy had worn only once and that Max had thrown in their faces. They were not bad at all, they were even beautiful.

"Nah! There's nothing wrong with that." He looked at the teacher who was entering the classroom. "Max just hates being something that can make her look defenseless. "Oh, and she hate princess"

Sophie nodded as if this were some very interesting information, but she kept her eyes on the teacher, fascinated. Mike suppressed the chuckle in his throat and remembered being in the same state of the girl when he met the teacher. He was a tall, young man, but he was hunched over and behaving as if he were already within a stone's throw of senility. He wore suspenders over his heavily starched shirt and, attached to his neck, wore a ridiculous cowboy tie.

"This is Mr. Richard McClain, our Physics teacher."

"Good morning, class." The man greeted and waited for the act to be repaid, which took about five minutes. "Take your seats and please be quiet, I have to introduce someone to you."

He heard Sophie's low gasp beside him. She clearly felt that a presentation was unnecessary.

"Please, Sweetheart," the teacher asked when the silence took over. "Come up here and introduce yourself to your new classmates."

Watched Sophie rise from her seat and walk to the center of the classroom with the excitement of someone about to be executed.

"Hi." She nodded nervously to those who watched her so intently. -

Hmm ... Hey guys, my name is Sophie Eileen, I'm thirteen and ... That's it.

"You're the sheriff's niece!" Someone exclaimed, probably Troy. Did not know.

"Yeah, it's me."

Sophie tried to get back to the place where she sat, but the professor deftly detained her. Mike did not know if it was the scare or anything else, but he saw Sophie wincing and jumping away from the teacher's hand as if the man's touch were toxic. Richard did not hang on to it, instead, he held on to his shoulder more firmly.

"Do not you want to add anything else?" Where did you come from?"

"Manhattan, I came from Manhattan, more specifically from SoHo. I'm living now with my uncle, as everyone already seems to know."

"Anything else? How did you end up in this town?"

"I-I think this is very personal."

She stumbled away, desperate to get away from the spotlight she had on herself. Poor girl, she laughed to herself with a pang of kindness, barely knows what awaits her. Sophie Eileen was new to town, but most of all, she was the niece of Sheriff Hopper, the man whose life was unknown. The eyes of all the citizens of the city would be upon her in the coming months. She'd be under the spotlight for a long time.

Notes for the Chapter:

Are not you thinking the boys are accepting too quickly that Sophie is not El? For a group of boys who fought so bravely to rescue their friend from the inverted world, they are calm and understanding too. Prepare yourself why perhaps they are not accepting this as you have been showing them.

4. Conjectures about the Sheriff's niece

"... You multiply that two by all the numbers and letters that are inside the parentheses." Mike heard Sophie guide Max in a voice veiled and patient. Usually this assignment was assigned to him, but he was too busy at the moment to help the redhead. He would not admit it so soon, but he needed help, too. "That's it! Organize everything, being careful with the positive and negative signs."

He shook his head, he really needed to focus on those damn algebraic expressions. Fifty-five questions, what the hell was this professor doing in his head? It was as if the man had seen Sophie's arrival as a suggestion to show his worst side to the students.

The problem was not the questions, the amount, or the abnormal behavior of the man himself, it was really the level of difficulty the teacher had chosen. Never before had he had such difficulty in solving mathematical calculations as he was having at that moment. The more he tried, the harder it became. The irritation that came from error after error did nothing to cloud Wheeler's mind.

Mike glanced sideways at his friends and found them suffering the same penance. Everyone in the room, with the exception of the girl Eileen who had been leading Max in his mathematical advances, seemed to be fumbling with that exercise. Great, besides looking like El, the girl was also a genius with the numbers. Wonderful! This really was not helping to feel some kind of acceptance for the likely new friend.

He snorted, dissatisfied with the third incorrect result that was to occur in the forty-fourth question, and erased it with force. The sheet of notebook, which was supposed to remain unblemished white, was ridiculously stained. He was a perfectionist boy, he simply abhorred mistakes; I hated it when things got out of their way. It had not always been that way. According to Nancy, such a mania of perfectionism had arisen after a great loss. Ted Wheeler had shrugged, that would pass, and if it did not pass, it was not such a bad thing. Karen Wheeler had supposed it was a sequel to the experience of losing her best friend and then seeing him rise from the ashes like a phoenix. He had really lost someone, but it was not Will

Byers.

Another sequel that went beyond perfectionism was the high irritability. Anything irritated him—from a simple fly whizzing incessantly to a calculation that went wrong, just like the one he did. This was all attributed to puberty. Everything was attributed to puberty. Absolutely everything!

He turned back to the calculation, he had to concentrate.

“Arrange the equation, Max, and try to simplify as much as you can.”

Max's low murmur was a buzzing sound like the beeping of a bee.

“I got it!” An abrupt jerk pushed Mike's body forward. “I did it, Wheeler!”

She let out her breath.

“Good, Max. Congratulations, now, please ...”

But the girl no longer listened to him, was busy leaning to see the fruitless results that Mike had been getting.

"You could not, Wheeler," she murmured, puzzled. "I did it, but you, you, could not! Are you going to want help, or are you going to stand there proudly, not accepting anyone's help?"

He tapped his pencil against the paper again and again, impatiently.

"Leave it," Sophie said to her new friend, her voice soft and pleading. *No, don't intercede for me!* "He's trying to concentrate."

Max did not respond with one of his usual rude remarks as he would have done with Mike or anyone else, it was as if she feared losing her new friend. Friend ... That was it! So obvious! As much as he insisted on acting like a boy and relating to, Max wanted to have a friend, someone who understood her completely.

"Relax! I'm just messing with Mike. You know that, do not you, Wheeler?" Max's hand messed up Mike's black wires. Christ, she knew how much he hated it messing up his hair. "Hey, are you going to

want help or not? Accept now or shut up forever, Wheeler.”

Mike considered calmly; If he accepted Max's help, he would be eternally tormented by her.

"Thank you, Max, but I think I'm going to ask Nancy for help." He closed the notebook to the sign of lunchtime. "She's good at such things. With almost everything, by the way.”

The classroom was almost completely empty, there were only six of them inside. People did not usually stay in the room during lunch hours, it was as if they felt like cloistered animals.

"Come on, you're going to have lunch with us, Sophie," Max said. "We have a table of our own!"

It was a table large enough to be occupied by ten individuals or, if they were willing to squeeze against each other, even by twelve people. But Mike was lucid enough to know that this table would never be full-not that he wanted it. It was their table, that was reason enough to be a disincentive to anyone. No one wanted to sit at the same table where Mike and his friends were sitting, people would choose to sit on the floor, but they would not sit next to them.

To this day he did not fully understand why Max had been sitting down and walking beside them – Especially since she was the sister of who she was – and now such an unknown connection was also with Sophie. The girl could be friends with anyone, but she had just chosen them to be the losers of the school.

Max's expression dropped at the obvious hesitation of the owner of short chocolate locks.

“What?! You do not want to have lunch with us, is that it?”

Sophie frowned at the accusation in Max's voice. Mike and the other boys stared at the scene without letting a single detail escape them.

"I ... It's just ... My uncle said he'd pick me up at lunchtime. He said something about having important issues to be resolved.”

The redhead arched an eyebrow, her arms folded over her chest,

looking suspicious. Max did not believe what the girl was saying to him, and to tell you the truth, he did not either. Sophie was clearly trying to dispense with their company without hurting anyone's feelings. Perhaps he had heard about their bad reputation at school and did not want to associate with them. It was very sensible of her. Too bad that such good sense was hurting Max.

"You really did not have a better excuse?" The redhead asked in anger.

Mike exchanged a brief glance with his friends, a silent agreement between them; Under the first threat of Max's runaway, they would hold her. Mike could not tell her, but with the help of his friends, four boys would hold her with extreme ease. That action had not come out of their fear for Sophie, no, it had come from fearing Max. It would be too bad for the little girl to get caught up in a mess with Sheriff Hopper's niece.

"Oh really?! Let's just say he does not want to have lunch with us. It is so easy! Speak soon!"

"I want to..." The one with glasses tried to justify, his eyes pleading.

"Sophie?"

The six teenagers were startled by the reverberation of the new voice. Standing by the entrance door, with a stature that made it impossible for them to ignore him and still wearing his work clothes, was Jim Hopper. He looked a thousand times better than the last few times he had been seen by young Wheeler.

Sophie's face became resplendent before the voice of the man who welcomed her into his residence.

"Uncle Jim!"

Perplexity was widespread when Sophie, with no warning or clue what she would do, run and lunged at Jim Hopper for his uncle's arms. The man, the same Jim Hopper who had interrogated and terrorized them slightly during the disappearance of Will Byers, returned the affectionate act as if it were natural.

Mike wanted to rub his eyes, discredited that the scene unfolding before him was really happening outside the dream world. Discredited was the right word to define it. Of course he had some respect for Jim Hopper, however, at no time had such respect shown him to be a loving person, someone who could give affection to a teenager like Sophie.

"How much excitement, child!" Jim Hopper exclaimed, his usually serious voice had taken on a loving tone. "Hello, boys." He smiled kindly as she noticed Mike and the others. "How are you?"

The group babbled incoherent responses, the emergence of an adult destabilizing them momentarily. Dustin, fumbling, got to babble several times about "pudding" and "chocolate cake". Mike rolled his eyes at the nervousness of his curly friend. Jim Hopper was not a monster-though he resembled a mountain ogre with his enormous height and careless appearance.

He rubbed the back of his neck, unable to contain the feeling of consternation that invaded him with a sickening speed. The presence of Hopper in that room evidenced the truth in Sophie's words - the girl was not dismissing them, she would walk and talk to them on school days. Damn it! He would have to tolerate Eleven's ghost presence.

Tolerate ... That's what he was going to do. In no time, he knew with a certainty that he had never felt inside himself, would nurture a feeling close to his affection for the girl. Not that Eileen was a hateful person, on the contrary, she could captivate anyone she wanted. Except for him. She could not like the girl whose appearance, voice, and breath was a clear reminder of Eleven's absence. Just looking at Sophie, Mike felt something not very nice roar in his chest. It was not affection or love-it was an unreasonable resentment. She resented Sophie being there while El was so far away.

"These are my classmates, Uncle Jim," Sophie pointed out. "I think you already know them, after all, you've lived here for centuries."

Hopper nodded, his eyes fixed on the small group.

"Centuries." He snorted in mock indignation. "It even seems like I'm a

geriatric old man, Sophie.”

"Let's face it, it's close enough now, Uncle." Sophie snapped, causing great excitement among those watching the scene. "You're almost fifty. Half a century of life is a lot.”

To everyone's surprise, Jim Hopper smiled gently at that remark.

"Look out, young lady, I can punish you." Mike noticed that it was not a true warning, Jim's words sounded as if it were a familiar joke to him.

"Yes, but you will not."

"Yes, I will not. Unless you deserve it. But back to the initial subject; Yes, my dear, I already know them" He commented without adding how he had met the teenagers. "With the exception of Miss Rouge, I know everyone”

Max stepped forward at the mention of himself. His cheeks were flushed, a clear sign of the shame he felt for everything he'd said earlier.

"My name is Max, sir." She grimaced. "It's Maxine, but I prefer Max. You must have heard about my big brother, Billy.”

The sheriff stared at her, his eyes narrowing as he detected the shame in the little redhead's voice. It was no secret that it was rare that Billy was not in police custody, sleeping behind the bars of the police station. The young man lived in constant flirtation with danger and seemed to take pleasure in causing disorder and being detained by Hopper and his men.

"I think I've heard of him. I hope I'm not like him." Hopper did not have to worry about it, anyway, even if she played the bad guy, Max was far from engaging in legal problems as his brother did. "Sophie, my dear, I'll wait for you in the parking lot." Do not delay, we're already almost behind schedule.

“I'm coming, Uncle.”

Hopper's departure gave room for a palpable malaise to settle in the

room.

"I ... Sophie ..." Max started awkwardly. The redhead rarely apologized to anyone, not that she was correct at all times; He just did not regret what he did very easily. "I'm sorry."

"All right, Max, really," Sophie said, avoiding making eye contact with Max's blue eyes. The girl who smiled at her uncle's face now had pale, paper-colored skin. "Your reaction is justified, after all, you do not know me. It's normal to be suspicious."

Max stammered out a new apology, desperate to regain his new friend's affection.

"Are you going home yet?" Mike questioned for some kind of support for his redheaded friend sinking deeper and deeper into her own words. Changing the subject would help, it always helped when Holly was having a crisis of hysteria. "Going to visit some family?"

Sophie set the coral backpack on her shoulders.

"I don't know. My uncle just told me we had things to solve; He was very vague, which is no surprise." A brief sigh. "I have to go. See you tomorrow, I guess."

Sophie walked away quickly, leaving behind five astonished individuals, one of whom had a growing sense of remorse within her.

Max's blue eyes could no longer bear to bear the sea of tears she'd been holding back so hard. Max had never cried, and such a reaction-which left her with a fragile air-was a great fear to all the occupants of the table. Intimately, Mike wished Max would not succumb to tears. The fact is that he would not be able to comfort the girl and any attempt he made would leave pathetic in his eyes and in the eyes of others.

"Here, Max." Dustin piled four chocolate puddings before the girl sitting beside Wheeler. "You can have my puddings."

Food was always the best solution for the cure of unhappiness according to the judgment of Dustin Hendersen. However, to the unhappiness of the curl, Max disagreed completely with this view, for he discarded the little pile away from him with disinterest.

"She did not get upset, Max, you heard her," Will tried and was harshly reproached by the girl's inquisitive blue eyes. He did not back down and continued, "The Sheriff's niece does not even seem to be a spiteful person."

"You do not understand girls, Byers."

She pushed Dustin's puddings to Mike.

"Every girl is spiteful, and just so you know, when a girl says "it's all right" she actually means otherwise." She scanned the dining room impatiently without paying attention to the confused looks that Lucas, Will, Dustin, and even Mike, who had not been paying so much attention to the conversation, had on their faces. What do you mean, "when a girl says," that's okay, "she actually means the opposite?" That was confusing. El was not so confused like that. "Have you seen my brother? Forget it, you never see Billy. I'm going to look for him." She announced getting up in a jolt and almost knocking Mike out of his seat. "I need to talk to him about something."

They watched, unmoved, Max's red hair wandering through the dining-room tables until she was completely gone when she was devoured by the flood of teenagers. The arrival of Sheriff Hopper's niece was definitely leaving things upside down.

"Then," Lucas began in a low voice, his body bent over the table in a conspiratorial posture. "Is not she Eleven? Really?"

Mike drummed his fingers on the table and, impatiently, denied it with a mere nod. Of course Sophie was not El and would never get to her feet. That was so obvious. Why did not Lucas and the others not notice this as he had been doing?

"No, it's not El. Yes, I'm sure of it."

He took one of the pudding pots previously intended for Max by attacking him with the ferocity of an animal. Maybe if he had his mouth full, others would stop talking. How silly, of course not! They were boys, after all, and did not follow such good manners when they were alone.

"We're not so sure," Will commented, green eyes avoiding Mike Wheeler's reproving face for more than two seconds.

He continued to attack the candy, his hand clutching the cheap-and-counterfeit-metal cutlery-hard enough to reshape the object.

"Just listen, okay?" Dustin has a theory on the subject.

Puddled lips sketched a curt curl. Dustin, Dustin, Dustin ... Of course he was responsible for the conjecture that would be exposed in a few seconds. Who, besides the young Hendersen, could create more than a thousand hypotheses about a subject in such a short time? It was his signature.

A year ago it was also Mike's way, but after creating countless erroneous and disappointing conjectures about Eleven's whereabouts with Dustin, he'd abdicated that position. Exactly what he'd done until Mike finally succumbed to quitting. Was about to hear hypothesis 120.

"What is it, why are you laughing?"

"Is nothing. You can continue," He pleaded gently. "I'll be a good listener."

Dustin let out a resigned sigh. He more than anyone else knew how volatile Mike became the mere mention of the word "hypothesis" and "Eleven" in the same conjunction.

"You know, it's impossible for there to be so much physical resemblance between two people unless they are twins or clones ... What if Sophie is actually Eleven?" Dustin started excited about having the chance to expose the ideas he had been keeping for himself since he'd seen the sheriff's supposed niece. "I think she lost

her memory, so she does not remember us. Maybe killing the demogorgon made her completely lose her memory.”

That one, without a doubt, was one of Dustin's best theories, and it was also the one that most resembled something plausible and acceptable. But ... There was always a "but" to be added. Mike had learned to always look for a "but" when the subject was the young woman he had taken in the basement. Searching for a "but" was actually easier than dealing with the deception of yet another plan, of another theory failing.

"If she's El." He pointed to the pudding spoon as if the cutlery was the most dangerous of the guns. "How do you explain the fact that Jim Hopper asserts to everyone that she is your legitimate niece? What would be his purpose to do that? Eleven could not write or perform mathematical calculations, she could barely speak coherently.”

Mike had a point. Everyone knew that growing up as a guinea pig in a shady laboratory would have greatly damaged the girl's development. The few words he could utter were fearful and had been taught by calculating scientists and Mike. Wheeler had added a fair amount of words to her friend's scant vocabulary.

"In a year she could have learned the art of speaking and writing. She was not stupid, they just had not taught these things to her.”

"And we went back to Sheriff Hopper: What was his purpose in taking her into your home? Or was El manipulating his mind with her powers? You know, for him to believe she's really your niece.”

“That! Is that! Now you understand my line of reasoning ... "Dustin's expression lost its usual glow as he met his friend's mocking face. "You're not believing anything of what I'm talking about. Why is it so hard to take this seriously?”

Why do not I want to disappoint myself more.

"Sorry but I take this seriously, but at the moment I have to worry about more important things.”

Wheeler's simulated disinterest did not fool any of his friends. The

boy was a lousy liar and had highly perceptive friends.

“Do not come with that, man! A girl exactly like Eleven appears in front of you, talks to you and you come with this "I have more important things" conversation? Soon you, who spent two months whimpering crying for her?” Lucas said without flinching at his choice of words. “Wants to know? Screw you! That's right! We'll prove she's El with or without your help. We'll bring El back!” He determined in a tone that made his non-acceptance explicit by refusals that might arise at that table.

Wheeler shrugged, not wanting to raise any hope at all. Why give life to false hopes? Doing that would only hurt him. Sophie Eileen was not Eleven, accepting it ached less than harboring false expectations within herself.

"By the way, what are these important things you said?" Lucas asked sourly.

Mike winced at the thought of what he would have to endure when night came. Torture would be better than what awaited him.

"It's Tuesday, Lucas" he murmured tensely. "It's family night.”

Wheeler family night show everyone how perfect it was.

5. A disaster called "family night"

Nancy's every move was methodical and made it clear that she had vast experience in what she had been working on. Agile fingers interlaced Holly's blond locks in a tangle of what Mike believed would become a braid in the future, but which for him now resembled an untrained finger trap.

"WHAT THE HELL CAN BE MORE IMPORTANT THAN YOUR CHILDREN, THEODORE ?!"

The Family Night was basically a random night where the Wheeler family would gather to go to a restaurant - the only one in town - from Hawkins. It was a night where family ties reasserted themselves, well, that's what Karen Wheeler liked to assert when Nancy - old Nancy, not the current one - would shout that it was all a stupid idiocy or when Mike asked to stay home.

When little Mike loved family nights; It was when he had his father's full attention on himself and could unleash on the important events of the school. Aversion to that night began to emerge along with Ted's little affair with his son's heated accounts, the empty answers, the disinterested "interesting, Michael" that had sometimes made Mike's dark eyes wet.

He rose from the carpeted floor where he sat, choosing to evaluate Nancy's pink room to pay attention to the indignant howls from downstairs. Unable to face the two sisters, she turned her back on Nancy's relieving whispers to the younger sister.

"All right, Holly, it's okay. That was nothing, my dear."

Nothing, just another fight between Ted and Karen. That was commonplace in the Wheeler's house. In lazy footsteps he walked over to evaluate Nancy's things. Mike's room was arranged - no doubt more organized than Dustin and Lucas's room, only losing to Will's - but he would never get to the feet of his older sister's room.

Mike paused in front of the delicate mural that Nancy will build with untold level of appreciation and that he, in her three-year-old attempts to help her, will almost completely destroy. The photos glued together marked moments and important people in the young woman's life.

Nancy and Barb smiled spontaneously. Nancy on the beach, and in the background, a five-year-old Mike had on his sunny-weather face a grimace capable of annoying even the smooth master Yoda. Nancy and Barb in a local mall taster making strange poses. Nancy, flushed, wearing a pink ruffled dress (the same thing Eleven had worn when venturing into Hawkins's local school) ready for the winter ball where she would have as a companion a Sino-Canadian boy who lived two streets below. Nancy combing her friend's short red hair. There were pictures of two children on their lap - a blond girl in a frown and a boy with flashy ebony hair. The boy was obviously Mike (after his father, he was the only one in the family to have dark hair). She tilted her head to the side realizing that she was present in a great quantity of photos. The match was between him and Barb. There was no sign of either the girl's parents or her boyfriend, Steve Harrington.

Mike, at most a year old, happily grabbing the older sister's blond curls. He, displaying a cheery smudge of chocolate. He and Nancy, side by side, holding ice cream cones. Mike giggling at Will Byers after a joke told. He, crying openly as a twelve-year-old Nancy comforted him just as she had been doing to Holly. He still remembered why that cry: Troy, who at the time was just the boring kid at school, had called him a frog-face. This had not been the last time Troy had pestered him, though it had been the last time Nancy had acted like a true older sister by giving him comfort.

He turned to the next photographs, these were more current, less embarrassing and a clear courtesy of Jonathan Byers. Nancy smiling in the hallways of the school. Nancy with her arms around a visibly reluctant Mike, Nancy messing with his brother's black hair and Nancy ... He traced the photo carefully, deep down fearing to spoil the beauty of that photo with a single careless touch. Nancy, the present eighteen-year-old Nancy, dressed in one of her finest gowns, wore a resplendent smile while holding an excited Holly in her lap,

and beside them was an extremely miserable Mike displaying the most timid of smiles.

I'm not going to let them part us either, Nancy had said so earlier. Looking at that picture, Mike understood the determination in his older sister's words and supported her like she had never done before.

"It's a beautiful picture, is not it, little brother?" He heard the pride in her older sister's voice. "You can keep it if you want, I still have the negatives and I can ask Jonathan to reveal others for me ..."

The three brothers were startled by the sound of something crashing against the wall. Discussions had reached a new level of decadence. Wonderful.

"MIKE IS NOT A PUNISHMENT! MY SON HAS NOT DONE ANYTHING WRONG! IT WAS YOU THAT YOU DID! YOU ERROR, YOU SHOULD ASK FOR EXCUSES FOR YOUR SON, THEODORE! BE A MAN AND MAKE YOUR ERRORS!"

He left the picture and went to sit next to the two sisters.

"I do not think we're going to dinner" Holly muttered in dismay.

Holly was the only Wheeler who still enjoyed family nights. Innocence prevented her from seeing the reality of things.

"I need to talk to Mama" Nancy announced to no one in particular. She got up from the bed with a pleading glance at Mike before she left the room. "Stay here taking care of Holly, I'll be right back."

He nodded in understanding. He had to keep Holly entertained, far from the family reality.

"Mike?" Holly sounded uncertain. "What noise was that?"

He pulled the blonde into a protective hug.

He hoped that Nancy's sudden departure had been to have her parents shut up, he would have done it himself if he had not been too young. Deep down he knew that age was just a pretext and that even if he was older and older he would have absolutely nothing. He was a

coward, a weakling. If she was older, if only she was Nancy's age (though she was not of legal age), she would have left that house already. In fact, when I was old enough, in a few years I was going to do it. He had always wanted to get away from that city, and the family decay that he experienced pushed him ever more against fate. Of course, he would miss the few friends he had, but he had to do it or he would lose his sanity.

"It was nothing, Holl's. I think Mama ... distracted herself and ended up bumping into a jug of flowers. Probably the one with porcelain.

"Mom needs to be more careful" Holly muttered gently. "She could end up hurting herself." She frowned, a question coming to mind. "Mike?"

"Hmm?"

He listened, eager for some breach of what was happening outside that little room.

"Mike, why do you call me Holl's?"

He stared at the girl, his attention now was completely hers.

"You do not like?" He asked worriedly. "It's a nickname. You know, to lower his name in a beautiful way."

He remembered giving an explanation close to Eleven. *My name is Mike, Michael's nickname.* Then he had named her "El," a simple nickname that would please her enormously.

"I like it, and I think it's too pretty." Holly's mouth formed a small O. "Does Nancy have a nickname?"

"Yes, Holl's, but she does not like him very much. I know from experience.

Nancy burst into the room, an exultant smile on her red-painted lips. Her body expression made it clear she felt victorious about something, as if she had won a long Dungeons & Dragons match.

"Daddy and Mom do not go to the restaurant." She spoke shortly

before lifting a bundle of keys. But that was not a bunch of keys, among those many keys was the key to Karen Wheeler's car. "But we're going! Mom lent me her car and even gave us money."

Holly jumped away from Mike, the excitement exhaling through every pore of the little blonde. In a blink of an eye she was gone, and her hurrying steps down the stairs could be heard with absurd clarity.

"Come on, Mike" Nancy called after him as he sat on the bed in despair. "You can order and eat whatever you want tonight, you know, as long as you do not get sick and vomit in the car."

"Can I have hamburgers and fries?"

"And you can also have a great chocolate sundae for dessert."

"Done!"

Mike followed her sister, taking the strict care of avoiding direct eye contact with the country by finding them standing side by side in the living room. Shards and more shards of glass and porcelain dotted Wheeler's carpet. He lifted his nose and walked on, occasionally kicking some shards away from the path he was walking. When had his family become that?

He allowed Nancy and Holly to chat with each other the way to the restaurant, Mike's mind, without his permission, drifting back to Holly's questioning.

Yes, Nancy had a nickname, he himself had raised it for not being able to correctly pronounce the sister's name, but the young woman had hated him and made it clear that she did not want to be called that foolish way.

"Nance," He gasped, desperately trying to follow the hurried footsteps of her older sister and her funny-named friend. "Wait for me!"

He tripped over his feet, clumsy. Motor coordination was not something he had to perfection. He could not control his feet, they did not seem to want to obey his master's orders. Mike did not resent it, that is, he did not resent himself when he was safe and sound, out of danger –When he was

trying to get away from Troy and his assholes, that was another story. But Nancy resented herself and so she concentrated on her feet so as not to trip again. He did not want Nancy to be ashamed of him.

"Yeah, Nancee!" Someone cried somewhere down the hall. "Wait for your little brother!"

He frowned, not understanding why the person was using such a mocking tone. That was rude, did not he notice?

"Nance ..."

He had almost collided with his sister, who had not seen him before, had stopped walking and now stared at him mortally.

"Go and stay with your friends, Michael, and leave me alone!"

He recoiled from the girl's angry blue eyes.

"Lucas has traveled, Will has chickenpox and Dustin has gone on routine exams." Mike tried to justify it. "I'm alone..."

Barb, the redheaded girl for whom Mike had great appreciation, shook Nancy's arms, his eyes begging.

"Let him stay with us" She friend said. "There's no harm in it, Nancy. It's your brother, he's alone and wants to be with you. Besides, he's so cute."

Nancy stamped her foot impatiently.

"No, Barbara. He determined harshly. Michael, go to the library, will you? There you will be fine."

"But, Nance ..."

Again somebody imitated him in a mocking tone and this seemed to take Wheeler older than himself.

"For! Stop it, Michael! Stop chirping the baby and keep following me through the corridors. You're too old for that! Stop calling me that stupid nickname, Michael!" She hissed venomously grabbing Mike's arm. "Are you listening to me?"

He fought to shake off her sister's grip, her dark eyes wide with fear. Nancy, the person who was his symbol of protection, was acting like Troy.

"Leave me alone and never call me that again, are we clear?!" She pushed the boy's arm away from her. "Come on, Barb."

The two girls walked away, from where I could still hear what they were saying.

"Do not you think it was too hard on him?" Barb asked her friend, her tone clearly disapproving. "I mean, it's your brother. Your little brother. He's just a kid who was without friends. What harm would he do to stay with us? It would be for so little time."

"Barb, my dear." She tossed the long platinum strands over his slender shoulders. "I love my little brother, but I do not really want him to walk behind me like a helpless puppy. Look, I have to put up with him at home and if I had to do this at school ... I swear I'd go crazy for good."

He rubbed his wrist where Nancy would shake him. She was ashamed of him, he. Which was blood from her blood. Okay, If that's what she wanted, that's how she would have it.

"Earth calling Mike" Nancy called out, her hands busy pulling Holly out of her child's seat. "We're here, you can get out of the car."

The place was full, which was completely incomprehensible since even half of the week was not yet. But that was Hawkins, almost nothing made sense in that tiny town. The appearance of demogorgon and El exemplified this.

"Stay here, Holly. Do not go out or talk to strangers." Nancy directed her younger sister after finding an empty table. "Mike and I are back."

Holly nodded solemnly, her eyes alternating between Nancy and Mike.

Mike cringed at the looks he and Nancy were drawing toward him. He knew very well what people thought and whispered about the

absence of Karen and Ted Wheeler. The unfortunate Wheeler brothers, poor children, denatured parents

"What do you want, Mike?" Burger or something else?" Nancy asked in the long waiting line. "You can ask for something else if you want."

He shrugged, had no desire to tell Nancy that he had no appetite. Hearing the fights between Karen and Ted Wheeler made him sick.

"It could be anything." He rummaged through the restaurant, pinning himself to a special table. The table where Holly was supposed to be, but she was not. Oh, Christ, that could not be happening! Lost the air. "Nancy, I'm going ... I'm going for a ride, okay? I think I saw a friend of mine and I want to exchange an idea with him."

He stumbled away. Yes, he should have told Nancy that they had probably lost their younger sister, and he was going to tell her; But only if he could not find it on his own. It was unfair to panic over Nancy when the missing person was Holly, the Wheeler famous for running away in the sly and soon to be found by one of his desperate brothers. Holly never went very far in her adventures, she was always around.

"Where are you, where are you?" He murmured under his breath after five long minutes of searching. It had never taken him so long to find his younger sister, and he was already beginning to feel the worry creep into him. "Please, Holl's ... Think, Michael!" He had already checked everywhere imaginable with the exception of ...

He staggered toward the restrooms of the restaurant, panic cracking in Mike's ears. Now he understood, in part, everything that Joyce Byers had felt during the disappearance of his son. He understood, more specifically, how Jonathan had felt. What if she was not in the bathroom? What if the demogorgon had taken her? Oh, God, this time he did not have El to help him ...

"...ancy and Mike. They are my brothers." He heard Holly's voice sob for someone. "Can you help me find them?"

He skidded around the corner of the hall leading to the bathrooms.

There was Holly, immersed in her childish panic for help ...

"Of course I can help you, Little angel. Calm down. Come on, let's find them."

Sophie? Was Sophie Eileen comforting Holly? Screw you! Holly was safe and sound - far from the demogorgon - and that was what mattered at that moment.

"Holly! He run to take the girl in a tight hug. He buried her face in the blond braids of the little sobbing. "My God, I thought I'd lost you ... Never do this to me again, not after what happened last year."

"I wanted to use the bathroom, but you and Nancy were busy so I came alone, but I ended up losing myself." She cried clutching at the collar of Mike's shirt. "Sorry, Mikey. Sorry about Holly, please. Do not tell Mom or Nancy, please ..."

He lifted the girl from the floor and snuggled her into her lap. Holly was not a heavy child, but never, not even when she was a featherweight newborn, had Mike done the thing to lift her off the floor without blushing with the effort. Maybe it was getting stronger with the onset of puberty, or maybe it was just the effect of the adrenaline that was still flowing in his veins.

"All right, Holl's, all right. Already passed ..."

He turned to the girl who watched them with veiled curiosity. That Sophie looked a little like Sophie Mike had met at school. The blush that would come upon Sophie was replaced by a wan pallor, the smile she offered was tired and a little shy, much like the smile of little El.

"Thank you, thank you" He said, pressing Holly close. "I almost went crazy after her."

Sophie covered her lips with a giggle of embarrassment.

"Really? Because, seriously, you knew how to hide it very well." Sophie leaned against the wall. "She was very scared, you know?"

I think I was, too.

"But anyway, it's all right now." She leaned over to lean over Holly and place a kiss on his cheek. "See you soon, little angel blonde. Try not to get in trouble, eh? Stay close to your brother, he knows what he does." He shifted his attention back to Mike. "See you, Mike. See you around."

Sophie started to walk away from the two brothers, one hand resting on the wall as if that were the only thing keeping her upright.

"Are you hurt?" You know, with Max?" He asked when he actually wanted to let out a "are you okay?"

The brunette stopped where she was, her free hand closed in a small fist. Under the yellow, flickering light of the corridor the girl looked like a ghost. A ghost that was divided between the world of the living and the world of the dead. She seemed about to faint, and this simple thought caused Mike to panic again. Please do not faint here. I would not know what to do ...

"I'm not hurt with her, either of you, actually." She coughed noisily. "She had reason to distrust me. She did not know my nature to know whether or not I was telling the truth." Another coughing fit. "But that does not change anything. If she does, if you will, I will continue being a friend and walking with you."

"We want to," he said hastily. He was doing it for Max, just for her. "We'll save your place tomorrow."

Another giggle, this time weaker. Sophie's eyes were unreadable, especially with her glasses blurring a direct view. If only she could have a direct view of the girl's brown eyes, if she could look into her eye she would know if she was telling the truth.

"Okay." A break. "I have to go, my uncle must be on the brink of madness. He is a little Paranoid about anything that happens to me. See you later, Little angel ... See you tomorrow, Mike."

In a sudden explosion of energy that Mike could swear was not inside the girl, she left in hurried footsteps and disappeared into the meeting between the two halls. Mike remained standing where he was, half-conscious of the agitated breath his younger sister let loose

in the hollow of his neck. That had been strange. He tightened his grip on Holly's small body. Definitely strange.

Notes for the Chapter:

BUM! And that was the Wheeler family or part of it ~ for you with a special guest of Sophie Eileen. Do you like it? I particularly liked it, but I want to know your opinion. Hey, just so you know, a certain person who has the letter "E" at the beginning of the name, super badass and that we both love may appear in the next chapter

6. Why cannot you see me?

Summary for the Chapter:

Sophie Eileen was not Eleven, she was not El. The two had nothing in common other than physical and behavioral appearance. Anything. Sophie Eileen was not Eleven. This was the mantra Mike repeated whenever he looked at the brown-eyed girl. But then the words were lost and a small doubt surfaced in the back of his mind: Was Sophie Eileen really not El? Well, he would have to find out, for better or for worse.

He worried about the detailed scenario her mind created. He had been there before, not bodily. "That was impossible considering that the greatest distance he had dared to place between himself and Hawkins had been to visit the home of the maternal grandmothers who lived about 50 km from the city-but in earlier dreams.

Mike was standing in a huge forest that could easily be mistaken for the one around Hawkins. But that was not the forest of shadows and it would never be.

The place, heavily illuminated by the moonlight, was simply enchanting, and contained nothing in itself that referred to something dark. Trees of distinct species and sizes gave the place a strange mystical aspect with its highly greenish leaves. Flowers and more flowers, of all colors and possible aromas, were present in the long branches of each tree and shrubs as if they were purposely embellishments and not just a whim of Mother Nature ... If you stopped to take a moment of reflection, Mike would notice That the environment was an exact replica of one of the forests of The Hobbit. As he had not noticed before, soon he who was always so attentive to the smallest details.

"Mike?"

That was why Brunner had so belatedly perceived where he was.

Her voice. Nothing else mattered after the emergence of her voice.

To dream of that forest meant for Mike the possibility of hearing Eleven's voice. No, he could never see her, just heard his voice clearly. Sometimes he had tried to get a brief glimpse of the girl who had called him so insistently and had sometimes failed to reach the goal he longed for. He always got lost in the middle of the green expanse and eventually woke up. So he did not pursue her anymore; Now he could be content to stay where he was, always listening and giving the due attention she deserved.

"Mike?" Her voice called him again.

Usually it was easy to answer, a simple "yes, El?" Was enough for the dream to go its way as dictated by the script written by Mike's fertile mind. However, there was something different that night. Mike could not decide what it was just known there was something.

"Mike?"

Her voice sounded more melancholy than usual. She swallowed, her name caught in her throat.

"El?" He wiped his sweaty hand on his pajama bottoms. No answer. "Eleven?"

He waited patiently. Pressing El was not a good idea, he had done it on previous nights and the result had been disastrous.

"El", I prefer "El" It's prettier.

He felt her lips curl up in an involuntary act. The tinkling of bells that resonated with every word spoken by him made him delighted. Eleven, by itself, was charming.

"All right, then ... El?"

"Yeah, Mike?"

This was the opportunity he needed. The chance to question and not respond, as he always did.

"Are you alright?" He asked, fearing the answer he might receive.

I'm not well

I am dead; Hi, I'm a ghost.

I'm dying

"I think so."

He took a deep breath, searching for courage. She remembered reading Romeo and Juliet in literature class, and there was an excerpt, still at the beginning of the book, where Juliet Capulet cried out desperately and wondered where her beloved Romeo was. At that moment he cried inwardly for his courage. Oh, courage, where are you right now?

Part of him, a large part, also claimed to know where El was. El's location was more important than his location. He had never had much courage at all ... But what about El ... He had been close to her for a while.

"Where are you?" There was the question tormenting Young Wheeler's head for months. "Where are you?" He repeated, a slight touch of desperation ringing his voice.

A small, painful sob cut the cold air. Oh, God, he had made her cry! Just her!

"I'm here." Another sob. "Why do not you see me?"

Here where? He looked around, desperately wanting to glimpse something that would give him a clue where El was. It was fast, but he saw it. A brief movement in the bushes to his left. It was all he needed.

"Why do not you see me? Why?" She asked tearfully.

Mike darted toward the shrub where he had glimpsed what he thought to be El. He fumbled and all he found were branches and dried leaves.

"Here" El's voice, this time across the clearing. "I am here..."

He dragged his bare feet over the grass stained by droplets of dew, the ego minimally injured. Before he even started the chase he already knew he would not find her. He never could. But trying would not kill him; It would only make him wake up in the warmth of his own room.

"Did the bad guys get you?" Are you in the Upside Down? Is that it, El?"

He closed his eyes, concentrating. It was an old tactic that Karen Wheeler had taught him as a form of meditation and also so that she could situate herself in case she ever got lost in an unknown place. He had never been lost in an unknown place, so it was the first time he had used that tactic. The cold wind hummed frantically, El's sobs were low and sounded little far from the place where he was.

Looked around. Nothing but trees and ... A pair of faded and old converse camouflaged among bushes and a curtain of thick flowering tendrils. I got you, El!

"I'm here" Coughed noisily. "Right here, Mike."

Here where? Here behind the trees or would it be here in the Upside Down? He approached the sneakers with calculated caution. No change happened this time. El continued standing where he was. That was good, right?

"El?"

Wrong!

There is a thud that is undeniably a body falling to the ground. El's feet are now tilted to the side, his slender legs now fully visible in the silver moonlight. She was sitting in a position that only the girls clung to as they sat on the floor. It was something loose and at the same time delicate, something complicated that apparently came from within the girls, which was completely instinctive since even El made use of that position, El, who throughout his life had had zero contact with the world in General who will tell the female world.

"Here," She hummed sadly. "I'm here, here ..."

He dropped close to the girl, his obsidian eyes studying desperately everything he could see of the girl.

El's shoes were still the same as he had given her with the addition of moss and mud likely to come from the places he'd been in the past few months, his legs - he felt flushing - slightly larger than he remembered (Not that he had paid attention to them before that) and contained traces of dirt and dried mud. The dress she wore was not even the same one that belonged to

Nancy, it was not even a dress to tell the truth. The girl's dress fabric was thin, with a subtle quadric pattern very similar to the dresses worn by hospital inmates, it was torn and its previously white color now had a color completely different from its original hue; It was filthy, painted by dark colors such as moss green, mold gray, and crimson of aged blood.

Blood! Was it hers? He studied her again, and only then did he notice that there were black bruises on El's legs, bruises still open, and others about to close, with both cases leaving scars.

"You changed your dress." Mike's voice sounded loud and sharp in his ears. "Sorry, sorry, sorry! I did not want to sound so complaining." He added quickly as he shivered.

The girl's hands, resting in her lap, became agitated at the tone used by the Wheeler. There was blood on it too, it looked more recent, redder than the one that stained the garments of Jesus. That was fresh blood! She was hurt and there he was paying attention to the clothes she wore.

"I'm sorry, Mike ..." Her voice was a faint whisper. El did not raise his voice very easily.

He felt filled with guilt. So many nights he had tried to approach her, and now that he had succeeded in accomplishing such a feat he was blaming her for something she was not even guilty of.

"Do not apologize, El."

"You ... are not you sorry?"

Another wave of guilt. How could she encourage such unkind feelings in Mike? Before the girl he went from joy to sadness, from anger to worry in the blink of an eye. This was not normal, of course not.

"I'm sorry ... Damn it! I have to apologize. I'm being a complete fool with you." He saw the little bloody hands move nervously. "Are you hurt, El?"

In the long minute, Mike gets a mental picture of El's big brown eyes as she studies herself.

"Not much."

To say that El was not hurt would be euphemism. In the background, Mike knew Eleven wanted to spare him his true state - the naive girl targeted for laboratory experiments was once again protecting the nerdy boy from the small town of Hawkins. Was there really something ironic there or would it be Wheeler's mind creating things That did not exist?

"Right." He straightened up for a more comfortable position. "Where are you?" That was his last attempt, if she did not give him an answer he would not try.

A loud female sob echoed through the trees. Mike felt his heart tighten, he hated to hear someone cry - especially if that someone cared for El.

"On here! I'm here in front of you! Why cannot you see me? Why?"

Mike blinked, surprised at the sudden explosion of Eleven. She was talking too much to someone with such limited vocabulary. Not that it was bad, it was just ... Shocking.

"Where, El?"

"Right here. On here!" She insisted once more. "I'm here!"

Maybe the one El was referring to so frantically was the tendrils? He raised his hand to push the plant away so that he could see the girl he longed to glimpse, and then saw things happening before him as if in magic. The plant moved back and forth, propelled by an invisible force that perceptually intended to push it away.

"El? Are you doing this?"

"No." There was a timid and insulted question implicit in his direct answer. Why would I do that?

The tendrils now descended as green curtains came down to cover Mike's little vision of El. El sobbed again, tonight she was especially prone to tears.

"Do not cry, El. It's going to be all right." No matter how bad he was doing it, there he was trying to comfort the girl when he actually wanted someone to console him. "Soon you'll be here in Hawkins with us, we'll teach you how to ride a bike so you can ride with me and the guys. Or, if

you want, you can learn to skate; Max, our redheaded friend, has a skateboard. We will teach you everything."

El did not hear any of the promises, he was not listening to him anymore, and that evidence would soon wake Mike up.

"Dark ... Dark and tight ... Far ..."

Dark and tight ... The Upside Down was not like that. He had never been there, but Will had spent five long days there and had described it countless times to his friends. No, she was not talking about that particular place.

"Can you still see me, El?" Can you hear me?"

"Y-yes," she whined, her voice choked. "I see and hear everything. I see you. But you do not see me ... " A series of sobs ensued. "See you, Mike ..."

Mike gasped, his lungs crying desperately for the oxygen in front of the impending panic that invaded him with sick slowness. The monster of panic always visited him after the dreams in which El made himself present and this was a consequence that he willingly accepted (anything to see Eleven) and even had come to miss in his absence. The abstinence from seeing her, even in his dreams, had nearly driven him to madness.

Initially dreams of El were constant, there was not a night when Mike did not have it in his dreams; Were two months in a row so that it would all be over and there would be a torturous gap of ten and a half months.

He blindly groped for the dumb servant and froze as he did not find what he was looking for. Water, that was the key to calming the monster that was born after dreams with El. Water that was not there. He was not going crazy, he had gotten a glass of water because he knew of the nocturnal habits he had. Maybe his mother had taken him away, afraid that he would hurt himself by knocking over the glass.

He pushed the covers aside, convinced he could walk down the stairs to the front of the house to find water. He fell to the side. Oh oh! Panic was overcoming him.

"Mike? Michael?" He groaned in response to the call. Was that his mother or was she Nancy? Their voice was more and more similar. "Hey! It's all right, here, drink some water, it'll help."

Not knowing who the owner of that ringed voice was with concern, Mike just allowed himself to be helped. Gentle hands helped him to sit down and guided Mike to his lips a glass of water. He took the glass to himself, his trembling hands almost knocking over the glass object on the floor. As he drank desperately the content offered to him, the brunet glimpsed the golden glow of two tiny ballet slippers that hung from the person's necklace and immediately knew who was there with him.

Nancy was supporting him. Shit! She had witnessed it all.

"Do you feel better?" He nodded, his lips glued to the glass. "I did not think I was afraid of the dark anymore, little brother."

That would have been an innocent comment, even casual if Michael Wheeler did not know his older sister. Nancy, who had been raised to be a gentle and delicate lady, rarely asked straightforward questions, especially if she knew that her questions would cause discomfort. Nancy would stand around the person, soothing her with frivolous matters until she felt comfortable enough to share her problem.

"I thought so too," he murmured against the glass. "I'm too old for these things?"

Mike had framed himself for this - to play, hide what he felt until the last moment when he could not bear it any longer. Serious things only surfaced with people of Mike's confidence (Lucas, Will, Dustin, Max, and, since last year, El) and Nancy, no matter how different she was from the snobbish girl she had played months ago, had not conquered His trust completely.

He straightened up, realizing that Nancy was holding him in an unsteady position for both her standing and half-sitting.

"Thanks for ... You know." He swung the object awkwardly before placing it on the bedside table. "You took it from here? Because seriously, if it was you, do not do that anymore."

"It was Mom who took it, Mike, not me." Nancy said softly. "I was replacing what had been taken away."

"Oh, okay."

The brunet chose to face his hands when Nancy sat down beside him on the bed. What was she doing?

"Remember when you called me Nance?"

He wrinkled his nose at the question.

"Have you been listening to my conversation with Holly?" He accused and rolled his eyes at a positive nod. One less point for Nancy. "I remember very little, almost nothing, if you want to know."

He shook his bony shoulders without knowing the purpose of all this.

"I remember" She paused, a preparation of quiet ground. "You know, you always liked ghost movies and aliens; you watched them all without blinking, fascinated by everything he saw appear on the screen. Even today you are like this. But you were small and, as much as you did not want to take it on, you were afraid."

"What's all about your nickname?" He broke off without understanding what the meaning was. So he had nerd tendencies since he was little? Great news.

Nancy sighed, was not exasperated, just tired.

"You had nightmares, Mike, terrible nightmares that made you show up at my door in the middle of the night asking for shelter in my bed. I was not your first choice, of course it was not, but it was who gave you shelter, after all."

Mike blushed without doubting his sister's word. It was his doing to do something as pathetic as Nancy's story.

"You were little younger than Holly and still could not pronounce my name correctly. Nance, it was like that, with his voice calling me that I'd wake up to comfort you. You created my nickname, Mike, and, you know, you can use it again if you want. I miss."

He nodded, more courteously than by agreement. Nancy sighed again.

"Come here." The blonde pulled him into a hug that he reluctantly accepted. "You can tell me about your nightmares if they're too scary."

The only boy Wheeler lowered his eyes, embarrassed by the attention he received.

"My dreams are not frightening," he murmured softly, his mind locked in the image of El. "Not scary. Sad, maybe, but not scary."

"If you are saying..."

Nancy rocked the younger man's body from side to side as if he were babysitting a newborn and not a thirteen-and-a-half-year-old boy. Mike was a mystery to her and had been so from birth, actually since the announcement of her arrival. But lately it was getting worse - At one point he acted according to his age (although his standards were very different from the others his age) and in others it seemed to have the wisdom of someone who had already seen how bad the world could be.

Worst of all? He, in fact, had had a fair share of the wickedness the world could provide. Even if he had not seen it all by himself, even if everything had happened in the company of his loyal nerdy friends, he was, after all, one of the most emotionally wounded only to lose to Will Byers. Mike had lost someone important to him - the girl whose ideas were expressed through his expressive brown eyes - and did not even know how to handle it.

"Why are you awake at ... What time is it?"

Two-thirty in the morning. I was studying for college. "He cherished the younger brother's dark hair, unaware of what he was doing. Since the boy's birth he had enchanted himself with his black wires and

with the freckles that stained his face. "I have to earn a full scholarship."

Mike closed his eyes slowly, Nancy's cuddle and the delicate swing made him drowsy.

"You will get it. Where do you want to go?"

"I was thinking about state university, what do you think?"

"Too close." He mumbled to himself. "NYU, Yale, and Stanford seem more reasonable. When I graduate I will try for one of these."

The young woman pulled out a blue blanket to cover her and her brother.

"Do you mind if I sleep here today, Mike? I'm too lazy to go to my room."

The questioning took forever to overcome the cloudiness that was taking hold of the Mike's mind.

"What? Oh! Whatever..."

Nancy watched her younger brother fall asleep, his pale eyes fixed on the freckled face. Mike was stubborn, even drowsy he refused to fall asleep quickly. First came a lazy yawn, then his eyelids flashed again and again until the movement was no longer consciously repeated.

"He's sweet, Mama!" She exclaimed, marveling at the small package Karen Wheeler pressed against her.

Little Nancy leaned forward anxiously, barely holding back the delight she felt at the sight of two curious eyes staring at her. Black eyes covered by a large crown of black hair. He was looking at her!

"Speak down, honey, so you're going to scare Michael." She sniffed or made an attempt to do so. The woman's voice was serene and too docile for something like that. "You want to hold him?"

The blonde nodded, and then stepped back.

"What if I knock him down? No, I do not want any more! I can end up breaking it and I do not want to do that."

Karen laughed at the concern of her now oldest daughter.

"You're never going to hurt him, Nancy, actually, you're going to protect him. He's your little brother, here he takes it carefully, yes?"

Nancy sat down beside her mother to welcome the newest member of the Wheeler family into her arms. It had always been just her and her parents, the only child in the house, but the arrival of that baby completely changed the landscape of things. She was no longer alone.

The small package was surprisingly heavy and hectic, but as beautiful as expected. The baby was as delighted as she, he was pulling and babbling non-stop.

"What's that on his face? Is it a defect? Is that why he spent so much time in the hospital?"

The matriarch Wheeler sighed.

"They are freckles, my dear, and they are not a fault; some people find them charming. Michael is a little more fragile than you and the other kids, so he spent so much time in the hospital." Karen's voice became slightly shaky, as if she were about to cry. "He's still too fragile for this world."

The baby let out an excited shriek as he curled his hand into Nancy's blond curls. He had strength and did not seem very fragile to her; It was about the size of a normal baby, and, except for its excessively white skin, it looked like a normal baby. But her mother, a wise woman, did not lie.

"Well, nothing's going to hurt him while I'm around. That's what the older sisters do, is not it? They must protect their younger siblings."

Nancy stroked Mike's hair back to reality. She was still willing to protect him

7. A brilliantly indomitable personality

Summary for the Chapter:

It was obvious that they wanted to prove that Sophie and El were the same person, but until the moment they had made no progress. They had already discovered a lot of things about the girl - like, for example, that she loved rollerblading and would use them to get around the city or that she loved flowers - but nothing that would indicate some behavioral resemblance between her and El.

One thing Mike Wheeler had to admit about the Sheriff's niece: The girl definitely had a say. The next morning, fulfilling his word, Sophie Eileen had acted as if Max's mistrust had never existed, and that was a relief to both the Wheeler and his friends and Max. It would be a pain to see Max lose the only friend she had won over in her stay at Hawkins because of her own nonsense.

Of course his apprehension was motivated by concern for his redheaded friend - who definitely needed someone like Sophie in her life - she did not have enough affinity or affection for Sophie to care about her. Mike was grateful for her, nothing more.

"So, Sophie," Lucas began, catching the attention of the girl in glasses and the others at the table. Mike narrowed his eyes at the forced causality in his friend's voice. "What was it like to live in a city as big as Manhattan?"

Sophie blinked, not understanding the sudden rise of that question.

"Cool, I guess," She murmured, playing with her lunch. "Manhattan is a big city, ten times the size of Hawkins, but still a completely normal city. I never even explored half of the city; I confined myself to my neighborhood."

Mike rolled his eyes, not at the response of the girl with glasses, but at the friends and purpose they had in mind. Those questions were not occasional or motivated by mere curiosity; otherwise, they would

not have been so constant during the course of the day. Whenever they saw the opportunity arise, whether in the middle of social science class or at lunch, Mike's friends were there, ready to bombard Sophie with questions about his old life.

It was obvious that they wanted to prove that Sophie and El were the same person, but until the moment they had made no progress. They had already discovered a lot of things about the girl - like, for example, that she loved rollerblading and would use them to get around town, or that she loved flowers, that any kind of candy was always welcome to rejoice her - but nothing to indicate some behavioral similarity between her and El.

"What about your friends? Are you missing them so much? By the way, what were they like?" It was Dustin's turn that, Mike noticed, had a notebook, the kind detectives use, casually positioned next to his meal. Subtle, Dustin, really subtle.

The niece of Sheriff hesitated before the flood of questions that played on her, her eyes acquiring a notable hint of anxiety.

"You do not have to respond if you do not want to," Mike murmured to the girl and immediately felt a kick in the shin.

Mike frowned at his friends for both their childish actions and the insistence and insensitivity they were having about an issue that clearly bothered Sophie. The poor girl probably missed her friends (who could blame her for missing the old adventurers?) And there they were acting as if that was not very important. Maybe it was not for them, but Mike could tell it was for her.

He sought Will's gaze, the wisest of the group he rarely and rarely let himself be carried by Lucas and Dustin. Will avoided it as much as he could, and when he could no longer avoid it, his green eyes had a clear and disappointing message.

"Let it roll, man." Will stammered so that only Mike could hear.

Let it roll?! The poor girl was almost in tears and Will really was acting that way? Mike would be such a jerk if he let the conversation continue on that course.

"There were not many children in my neighborhood, and the ones that existed were not very nice to me. The same thing happened at school." Mike heard her reply in a loud voice. "I had no friends. I don't miss anyone and I'm sure no one misses me."

They were all silent, the words of consolation they wanted to utter were locked in their throats. This was indigestible information of the kind that takes away your hunger and verbal eloquence. It was also information that might have been forgotten in Sophie's past, for the sake of her own.

Let it roll, man, Will had babbled this a few minutes ago and there was the end result of the much-advised "let roll." Sophie whirled the pendant of the gold chain that she carried around her neck. A small heart accompanied by a small pebble that resembled a pearl. It was a strange combination, yes, but also very beautiful.

Why was Mike so focused on that? Why he did not want to see the sadness that painted the eyes of Sheriff Hopper's niece. She did not like to see anyone sad and Sophie was no exception to this rule. Maybe Troy and James were, but she was not.

"The boys thought I was strange because of my glasses and the girls said I looked like a boy, you know, because of the short hair and everything." She stroked his hair thoughtfully. Although short and wavy, the girl's hair was very handsome and she clearly did her best to fix it in a feminine way. Mike did not see anything wrong with her hair, did not think it made her look like a boy. He also saw no problem in the girl's glasses. *"Or maybe it was just that..."*

Not that he was buying the plan drawn by his friends (he did not support that little conspiracy) but that, that sad murmured phrase, stirred the curiosity of the brunette. Frowning, Mike opened his mouth to question her what the hell she was talking about. He asked nothing, did not get the chance.

More by instinct than anything else, he moved away from the table in sync with his friends as a football kicked over Will's food. The movement was slow and useless, the evil was already done and all were filthy with remnants of food, especially the younger Byers.

Sophie gaped. The girl was about to discover that in Hawkins there were also such idiot boys as those in her old town.

"Could the freaks give the ball back?"

Mike suppressed the hot surge of anger that began to inflate his chest. When you think things cannot get worse ...

"What the fuck, man! You're demented or what?" Max roared as she saw if something would cling to her red hair

"Shut up, redhead" he ordered, with disdain. "You lost the right to talk to me the moment you started walking with the frog face."

Mike received a painful punch in the rib the mention of the nickname created by Troy. He shrank as pungent pain spread as hard to ignore as the person who had caused it. Here was why Troy was not worthy of Mike's pity and of anyone but his relatives.

Mike and Will were Troy's favorite target; Will for being who he was, for having gained sudden fame after "coming back from the dead" and Mike for having pushed him in front of all of Hawkins's students. Troy would never get over the fact that he had been pushed and then pissed in the pants in front of several spectators, a fact he believed to be entirely Mike's fault. In fact, Troy even knew it was not Mike's fault, but it was much easier to blame him since he was not there to receive his penance.

Sophie, sitting next to Will and Max and facing Mike, watched and listened with brown eyes agitated. Slowly the expression of shock that painted his face was replaced by a warm determination.

"Who do you think you are to do such a thing, boy?" She demanded harshly. Sophie was too busy being kind and helping Will, so she did not see the look Troy gave her.

The bully's eyes widened. Was he seeing El in Sophie just like the others did? Troy's mischievous grin knew immediately that this was not the case; He was interested in the short-haired girl, and not surprised by the resemblance between her and El.

"Hello, you" Troy said in a friendly voice. Behind him, James, his

faithful companion, frowned, confused by his friend's sudden change of behavior. "What are you doing here, baby?"

Mike and Sophie shared grimaces of disgust. Sophie for being courted by someone like Troy - a person who clearly does not fall for his graces - and Mike for Troy to be drooling over the girl. Again, what she felt was not for her, but for him. Sophie and El were physically identical and seeing Troy doing that made him serious. It was as if he was smiling silly at Eleven, at El.

"I was having lunch until you interrupted everything with that boring little joke."

Troy laughed as if she'd told him a funny joke.

"I'm asking what you're doing at this table, you know, with the freaks?"

Sophie pulled her rosy lips together, her eyes still fixed on Will. Troy's presence was bothering her as much as it bothered the others.

"I'm with my friends," She snapped. Mike and the others were surprised by that change in behavior. Not even when they'd approached her in the middle of the hall accusing her of being El had she acted so ... Uncommon. "And I would be most grateful if you would leave us alone."

The little smile that Troy exhibited wavered at the tone of the girl's voice. He was finally realizing how undesirable his presence was in Sophie's eyes. "In the eyes of everyone who sat at the table, but he did not care for these others," and that irritated him. Indifference Sophie Eileen, solar and highly gentle niece Sheriff, made him beside himself.

Mike would even laugh if he did not know the problems that would arise for the brunette from then on. As a good intimidator he was, Troy could not tolerate his existence being ignored, and knew how to be a stone in the shoes of those who dared to do so. Sophie was having the audacity and did not seem willing to back down.

"We're going, sweetheart, but before I go, I have a question for you"

Troy began, his voice now sprinkled with venom. "Is it true Sheriff Hopper killed his daughter? I heard my mom and dad commenting on it the other day and I decided to take this question with you. Another question: He still walks with the" The malice in his voice and his smile became even more evident "Ladies of the town brothel?"

And with that, with this set of questions irrefutably cruel, Troy finally got Sophie's attention. His brown eyes shifted from Will to land, half-closed, on the bully speaking to him. The aura of the girl, once peaceful, had become an overwhelming fury. She seemed about to slap him.

"My uncle's life and what he does is none of his business" Sophie murmured dangerously. "Take care of your life and stop being a gossip asshole."

Troy growled, unable to contain the anger he felt. Sweet Sophie was showing off her claws.

"Well, your little bit..."

Sophie, deliberately ignoring Troy's overreaction, grabbed the mouth of American football.

"You came here looking for it, right?" She did not wait for an answer; She surprised Troy and everyone as she tossed the object into the bully's chest. "Here's your fool, see if you leave us alone, mouth breathing"

Troy's face twisted into a grimace of anger. He had been forced to go there to be humiliated (for the second time) by a girl whose hair barely touched her shoulder.

As soon as Troy was gone Sophie's furious stance was gone, too. The feline expression used by the girl withered quickly until it was replaced by something close to mortification. Sweet Sophie was back and she was visibly shaken and dirty.

"That was fantastic!" Max exploded, delighted with what he had witnessed. "You were fantastic, Sophie! No, you went there fantastic!

You were wonderful!"

Mike waved positively and did not have to look at his friends to know they were doing the same thing. He also knew what they thought about Sophie's reaction and was grateful they kept the opinion to themselves. Aside from Max, they had seen only one girl brave enough to face Troy: Eleven. Sophie, through her act of courage, had given hints that something in her personality matched El's. Both were brave and defended their friends. El had defended them several times in less than a week, and apparently Sophie would do it if necessary.

He mumbled to himself when Dustin, with a suggestive smile, nudged him to notice the notepad he was trying to get through.

She defended you, man!

He took the pen from Dustin's hand, exasperated.

Nope! She defended all of us, writing furiously. It was not me in particular. Stop traveling, okay?

Dustin's reply was not long in coming.

If you insist on thinking like that, Wheeler. But a question is worth: When did you become so obtuse? You were not like that when I met you.

He sent Dustin a meaningful glance before shoving the notepad into his jeans pocket.

"This is confiscated here until the second order."

Dustin blinked, perplexed.

"What?! No! Give it back to me, Mike. Man, this is not fair! You're being so childish!"

"I'm only going to give you back tomorrow, it's settled, it's no use insisting. No more Sherlock Holmes for today."

Dustin grunted about how immature Mike was, his eyes fixed on the pocket of Wheeler's jeans. In an act of sheer despair (That was his

job. If Mike did not want to help, he would not get in the way) he stepped closer to his friend, seeking to take back what was his rightful possession.

Noticing his friend intentions, Mike turned aside in time and immediately regretted having done so. The damn pad was not worth the pain he was feeling at that moment. He moaned loudly, not bothering with the look of his friends. The sudden movement had been too much for the rib that Troy had hit a few minutes ago. Mike was not a delicate boy or, as Ted Wheeler would have put it, a patsy - years of consecutive beatings had made him a bit more resistant to certain kinds of strokes - unfortunately Troy had the benefit of being gaining muscle and also knowing the Vulnerability of its target.

"Dude, are you okay?" Dustin questioned, worried about his friend, the irritation he had previously overlooked in the past.

He moved away from Dustin as much as he could. Despite being full of good intentions, the curly boy was not too careful when the injury in question was not in his body. It was not out of spite, everyone knew, he said, only for lack of delicacy.

"The idiot hit my rib." He laid his hand on the sore spot.

Dustin nodded in understanding.

"Is it my impression or is it getting bigger? Really! It's okay that we are in the growth phase, but what are happening to him are already antics. I mean, he's going to be the size of the incredible Hulk and I do not want to be here to see it."

The characteristic exaggeration of Dustin was welcome, at that moment, since it was not Troy, everything was welcome. He felt the painful region, already imagining an excuse to be given to Karen Wheeler; she would see the future bruise that would have formed there in a few days. Mike's mother had the inconvenience of invading the room while he changed clothes. Something made him extremely embarrassed. After all, he was no longer a baby and needed privacy.

"Do you think it's going to be very bad?" Sophie, who had tried to stay away from the conversation for some time, wondered. "Do you

need ice?"

He nudged the area one last time.

"No need ... Ouch!" Mike looked up to thank the girl's concern and gasped at the deplorable state she and Will met. "You're ridiculous!"

And indeed they were. It is necessary to emphasize that Will adored chocolate as much as or more than Dustin, and that his lunch, before the disaster with Troy, was constituted by a great amount of chocolate - Not that his mother approved it. No, this was a thing of the Byers brothers. Jonathan always helped Will smuggle his chocolate candy.

Will had her face, her hair and her chocolate brown garments, and Sophie, whose glasses were covered by something sticky, was not far behind.

"Thanks for the compliment, Mike" Sophie grunted, staring at the T-shirt and jacket she wore. They were destroyed. "You really know how to praise a girl. Your girlfriend will suffer with your compliments."

Laughed at his friends.

"It was not a compliment. And I do not have a girlfriend."

"Yeah, I know that," he admitted in a somber tone. "I do not have a spare suit. I'll have to stay in this state until the time of departure."

Max, whose red hair was now tied in two braids, began to help her friend, her blue eyes measuring the other girl cunningly. They were almost the same size-Max was a little taller than Sophie-and it would be reasonable for the redhead to lend some of her clothing to the Sheriff's niece. But then Max, the ever-unpredictable Maxine, turned his blue eyes to Mike and smiled. But what...?

"I can lend you a T-shirt, Soph, I have a pile in my closet, and Mike can lend you a coat. It's too cold for you to wear a linen shirt."

Mike opened his mouth, the "no" already on the tip of his tongue and then ... He gave up. The sun shining in the overcast sky was no use in

relieving the cold wind sweeping Hawkins during his fall season. It would be cruel for him to allow her to be exposed to the cold when he could actually do something to help her.

"I'll take the coat for you" he agreed peacefully.

Sophie stammered out a refusal.

"Come on, Sophie. You need to change your clothes to be minimally presentable " Max interrupted abruptly, grabbing the sheriff's niece's hand. "Meet us at the door of the women's locker room in ten minutes, Mike."

Ignoring Lucas and Dustin's malicious gaze (why they were acting that way?), He followed up with his friends to get the promised coat and help Will. Because "accidents" of the type were common in the lives of the four boys, they always kept a reserve outfit in the men's locker room.

"idiot, asshole!" Will cursed.

He closed the closet door with a deafening thud, too busy changing his T-shirt to see the faces of his friends. They were all shocked. Of the four friends, Will was the one who rarely exposed his anger and out of control-reactions of the kind were meant for Lucas, Max, and, more recently, Mike. Seeing him in that state left the other three frightened.

"Relax, man. It's already gone. Sophie has already shut that idiot's mouth" Lucas said rummaging through the closet.

They laughed at the memory of the thin-eyed girl facing the bully as if he were nothing. Sophie, whether or not she was El, had a brilliantly indomitable personality.

"She was great" Will agreed, pulling on a flannel T-shirt. "Do you think Troy's going to get her?"

They agreed in heavy silence.

"We've already seen that she knows how to take care of herself," Mike said, grabbing a coat from the closet. "She knows how to take good

care of herself. I think if he tries something he'll probably sort things out by himself; maybe she can get him suspended or something."

"Do you know who would teach Troy a good lesson?" Dustin questioned, still excited at the diner scene.

"El," Mike replied, catching his friends' eyes. "Look, I'll leave it to Sophie. I'll be back."

He walked away slowly, not wanting to give the idea that he wanted to get away from his friends by the subject they were putting on the agenda.

"What about my notepad?" You were not serious, were you? He heard Dustin question.

He smiled at the question. He took the notepad from his pocket, lifting it to a height that anyone could see.

"You bet you were. You're staying with me until tomorrow."

Mike's smile faded slowly as he began to hear the voices of Sophie and Max echoing outside the ladies' locker room. He tightened his coat against himself, the possibility of retreating and avoiding finding the two appealing, especially now that the feeling of solidarity had passed,

Idiot, that was what he was for thinking, for giving importance to the existence of that mediocre possibility. He had already given the word to both of them and had learned never to miss the word. Or break a promise.

"... he does not come and there is no problem. Come on, Max, I do not want to be late for class or bother someone with my problems. He heard Sophie's failed persuasion attempt."

He stopped walking. Were they talking about him?

"Stop being silly. Mike does not do those things. He's a man of the word."

Sophie laughed nervously, her hand flying to straighten her messy

brown hair. Yeah, they were talking about him.

"I never said he had no word, did he? It's just ... No matter how cool and gentle he is to me, I feel he hates me. Every time he looks at me he seems to be blaming me for something and even though I'm not guilty I blame myself. I feel guilty for something I did not do."

He tightened his grip on the coat, perplexed. Was he being so obvious as to how much he wanted her?

"Nonsense! The only person that Mike hates is Troy. Doubt he hates you or blames you for something."

With a heavy conscience, Mike approached the two girls, and that had nothing to do with the fact that the two of them had lowered their tone until the conversation had become an indistinct buzz. He was tired of listening to a conversation that did not directly concern him or her.

"Here" He said, holding out the jacket to the brunette as she received the attention of the two friends. "I hope it works for you."

Sophie, slightly startled by the Wheeler's sudden appearance, accepted the house, her hands trembling, her wrist covered by four gold bracelets that tinkled brightly as the girl settled into her borrowed clothing.

"It's all right" Max commented in a high voice.

Sophie pulled her coat around. The piece looked strange, and at the same time, matched with it. It matched her robes. This was still the same Sophie whose clothing clearly did not match the monotonous Hawkins. This was not yet El.

Notes for the Chapter:

I have only one thing to say: This is not going to be the last confrontation between Sophie and Troy. Wait there is much more ahead, my loves.

Kisses.

8. When a "I'm fine" does not convince

Summary for the Chapter:

Will frowned and appeared to be about to argue about it when he was struck by a painful cough. He leaned forward, his face contorted in a grimace as he pressed both hands to his stomach. He hesitated forward, a tumble in the foreseeable future if Mike was not there to support him.

He glared at the book resting on the table, and before it could contain what might be termed a childish attitude, pushed him away from him. He was not in the mood enough to read any novel whose name he had ever wanted to know. But apparently the enthusiastic literature teacher did not agree with the brunette.

Mike looked away from the classroom windows, his mind too busy to pay enough attention to what the landscape deserved. El was the owner of the thoughts of young Wheeler, not that this was a great novelty.

The dream - or would it have been a nightmare? - it was still fresh in the boy's mind, if he closed his eyes he could see the strange forest and the bruises of El. So he would not close his eyes - he did not want to remember the bruises and bruises that adorned the girl's hair; He did not want to think that she really was in that deplorable state. Eleven was strong, yes, but she was still a naive thirteen-year-old girl (or at least he supposed that was her age) with no preparation to deal with the real world.

“Mr. Wheeler?”

“Hmm?”

“Mr. Wheeler!”

He abandoned the ramblings about El. The teacher's voice, generally placid, sounded irritated.

"Mr. Wheeler, could you share your initial opinion with us from reading Shakespeare's work?"

Mike had always had a good coexistence with the literature teacher - she would spend any book during her class schedule and never direct questions to Mike, who was one of the few students who actually did an in-depth reading, being aware of the difficulties of behavioral adjustment Which he and his friends had with the rest of his age. And now this: The only time he decides to rebel by refusing to read the book, the teacher intercepted him with a questioning.

Shit! What was he going to say? *So, teacher, I did not read the book, but who cares about this other than you, the woman who will set my note?*

"Miss Grace, I ..."

He cringed, wanting to disappear, his freckled face burning with the attention he received from the teacher and his classmates.

"Here, Mike, I found it!" Sophie Eileen exclaimed. She was sitting by Mike's side and had been quiet since the beginning of the lesson, reading the book. She was the only "friendly face" in that class since the others had different classes.

Sophie smiled sheepishly and squeezed a crumpled paper in Mike's hands.

"I told you that you had not lost your notes" said casting a meaningful look at him.

Mike dismantled the paper, and there, in a somewhat crooked female script that could improve over time, found salvation.

Read.

For all intents and purposes this is your opinion,

Are his notes about the book.

And Mike, with a dry throat, read each line filled with Sophie's feminine handwriting. He read as if every word written there was the fruit of his mind. He talked about the possible existence of machismo present in the work, but that such a thing could serve to exemplify the culture and the customs of the time.

"Thanks for sharing your opinion, Mr. Wheeler." The teacher turned to Sophie. "Miss Eileen, do you agree with your colleague's opinion?"

Sophie adjusted the glasses that were slipping down her nose.

"Yes, Miss Grace. And I can also add the existence of the game of interests that involves the whole story. This is very clear at the beginning. I mean, Petruchio married Catherine for pure interest in his dowry; There was no love. He entered the story on the interest of one of Catarina's sister suitors, Bianca, since she could not marry until her older sister had been betrothed."

Mike nodded, supporting every word Sophie said, even if he did not understand. The teacher smoothed out the pink tweed cardigan, satisfied with the answer given by both but coming from one head.

"Who is Petruchio, and what the hell is that name?" He asked at the sound of the shrill signal announcing the end of yet another day of class.

The girl smiled, hiding a brown wick behind her ear.

"Strange name, right? But anyway, he is supposed to be the good guy of "The Taming of the Shrew".

The dark-haired man frowned curiously.

"Have you read this book?"

"Already. This is weird?"

Just a little.

"No. Hmm, okay. Are you coming with us to the arcade? It's a nerd

program, I know, but it's going to be cool, and besides, we're all nerds and we're not ashamed of it."

One more smile, he was restrained without losing his warmth. He was doing it to dispel remorse, the guilt that had haunted him ever since part of the conversation between Sophie and Max. He, the skinny nerd whose height had increased considerably since the last Summer, I was passing a wrong image. The resemblance between the girl and El was disturbing him to the point of acting grossly unconsciously.

The girl had not guilty of anything, she was not even directly connected to the events that had haunted the city except for the fact that her uncle, the Sheriff, had been a great help in the search for Will. The possibility that Hopper had told his niece about everything in no time came to pierce the mind of the brunette. The disappearance of Will and Barb, Demogorgon and El with their powers ... No, he had not said anything. If Hopper had done so Sophie would not have defended them from Troy's idiocy; she would not even be looking them in the eye for being too busy treating them as outcasts.

Sophie did not know anything; she was completely oblivious to the events of 1983. The big-city girl had just moved to a city ten times smaller than the city where she lived and was just trying to make friends. No one could blame her; They could blame Mike, who was putting up barriers that hindered her attempts. He, who had such a hard time making friends and abhorred any kind of exclusion, was disrupting the Sheriff's niece's approaching attempts.

"All right, I guess. My uncle keeps saying I need to get out of the house anyway." She stared at the pink all star she wore. "I have to tell my uncle. He can be worried."

He studied her for half a minute.

"We'll call him and tell him." He said as if it were the simplest thing in the world. He wanted to redeem himself and nothing would back him up. "There's a pay phone near the recreation area. You call from there."

Sophie accepted the suggestion without hesitation, confident that a single call could solve everything.

"Please, Floo, call him to me. I know he's busy, but it's quick." Sophie groaned into the phone's mouthpiece. "What is the level of importance? Oh really?! All right, you win! When he's finally free let him know that I'm going home to spend the rest of my day locked in the solitude of my room..."

Mike covered his mouth to hide his grin, and then lowered his eyes to the floor as a group of particularly grumpy girls passed unpleasant looks toward him and Sophie. God and he thinking that Nancy and Holly were the queens of the drama.

"Oh, I hope so, Floo, no problem." Sophie turned to him, a triumphant smile on her face. "Uncle Jim? Hi, I just wanted to let you know that I'm going out with some friends. Okay for you? It's with them, uncle, I do not know anyone else. To the arcade. What? Of course not! *Uncle!* Yeah, see you later. Kisses."

Mike frowned, confused by Sophie's flushed cheeks. Hopper had clearly allowed her to go to the arcade with them, but then why was she in that state?

"It all worked out, right?" He smiled mischievously. "You're not going to be locked in the solitude of your room all day, are you?"

The chestnut tree laughed at herself and her friend.

"No, I will not. Thank my dramatic gifts, without them, Floo would not have come to call my Uncle. Today she was irreducible." She walked to sit on the green grass of the playground. The long legs set in a vaguely familiar position that made Mike's face warm up a few degrees. "He said I have to be home by six-thirty. It's too early?"

Wheeler gaped. That was an hour and a half later than the time set for him and his friends. Hopper was definitely more liberal than he'd imagined.

The girl tucked her salmon backpack into her lap and pulled out a pair of white skates decorated with lilac stars. If Holly saw it, it

would drive him crazy.

"No. Actually ... Forget it." He scratched the back of his neck in bewilderment. He was not going to tell her that. It would sound extremely pathetic. "Look, I think the guys already went to the arcade, so it's just the two of us. I m-mean, let's go together, alone to the arcade."

What was he doing?! Sophie, busy swapping the all star for the skates, paid little heed to Mike's mortified expression. She was in her own world.

He tilted his head a little to the side, watching her closely. She really looked like El and this thought was a painful reminder of everything that had gone wrong after last year's events. Barb was dead, El had sacrificed himself; Even Will had not escaped unharmed. He snorted, suddenly furious. Will ... no matter how much the kid insisted, no matter how much Mike and his friends wanted to believe, everyone knew he was not the same. 1983 had left sequels in all, but mostly in Will.

"Mike? Are you okay?"

He did not dare to direct her. He was afraid to frighten her with the anger that had probably stung his face. He was trying to redeem himself and not frighten her.

"Look, I'm sorry I made you stay here with me." Out of the corner of his eye he saw her tighten the shoelace and then stand up without any inconvenience. She had an enviable motor coordination. "I saw how close you are, and if I'm right, you're hardly ever apart. I'm really sorry, really. I do not want to be a burden to you."

Mike dismissed the girl's apology with a nod. Hearing her apologize in that soft voice, so full of guilt added to the guilt he felt. You're not helping, Sophie!

She thought about what she said earlier to Max about feeling guilty about behavior. That was what was happening again.

"No, that's not it. It's nothing with you; It's silly of me. Let's go to the

arcade, okay? There are a lot of cool games, I think you'll like ...”

Sophie rushed closer to her friend, the urge to help speaking louder than anything else - he was visibly upset about something and she wanted to help him. She grabbed the boy's hand and, in a rush he was far from understanding, pulled him to face each other.

Unfortunately that was not the best of ideas and she also did not receive the best of reactions. Immediately, at an unbelievable speed, an electric current ran through the body of both teenagers, who, frightened, stepped back, trying to keep as far apart as possible from each other. Mike hid his hand in his pocket while and Sophie, her glasses twisted and her brown eyes blinking madly, brought her hand to her chest, more specifically, over the necklace pendant.

“Wh-What was that?”

He wanted to lie, to say he did not know what she was talking about, but the point was that he was not brazen enough to lie in someone's eyes the way he did with Sophie at the time.

"It was nothing." He sank his hand a little farther into his jeans. *An explanation, I need an explanation, even if it is not very coherent ...* "It was just a thermal shock. Your hand is very cold while mine is very hot. As I said: It was nothing.”

The girl shook her head frantically, her brown hair creating life during the movement.

“Yes, you are right. That was definitely it.” She murmured nervously. "Let's go to the arcade, shall we?"

Mike rode the bike, reluctant to take his hand from his jeans pocket. He, as a nerd he was, knew very well the concept of thermal shock - a phenomenon that consists of the abrupt change in temperature of a body - and he knew that the concept did not apply correctly to what had just happened. It was almost certain that the small event had no relation to thermal shock. I had it before, since if it were there would be a plausible explanation.

"Aha!" Max exclaimed, catching everyone's attention in the arcade (which in all were ten boys, the manager and owner of the place). "Take this one, Dustin! That was my best move!"

Dustin accepted defeat without grunting for long. That's a breakthrough, Mike thought absently, his gaze wandering with no right direction. Or maybe he had a right turn in his unconscious.

Sophie Eileen.

Ever since they had arrived at the arcade, the girl had kept herself quietly silent, occasionally, with exclamations and shouts of encouragement to those who were playing since she herself had not come close to any of the gaming machines at her disposal. , There was nothing but succumbing to a disturbing stillness.

The brown eyes, always fixed on some point other than him, gleamed meekly at the brightness of the pac-man's screen. She was pale, as pale as the night before when she met her at the restaurant.

"Dude" Will called. "What's going on here? You and Soph are strangers."

He arched his eyebrow suggestively, which made Will's blood focus on his ears.

"What's it?! It's just a nickname."

Mike raised his hands defensively.

"I did not say anything, did I?" He responded with the voices of Lucas, Dustin, and Max buzzing behind him like a subtle soundtrack. "What do you mean? I did not understand."

Will rolled his greenish eyes with an insolence completely unknown to Mike.

"You're not stupid, so stop acting like one and tell me what

happened."

The persistence of Will Byers had always been an inspiration to his friends, but at that moment he was being annoyed at Mike. He just wanted to forget what had happened, was that asking too much?

"Nothing happened, okay?" He answered, trying to hide any hint of harshness that might come. "She called the sheriff and asked permission to come with us. Only that. I did not do anything wrong and nothing happened. End of chat!"

Will frowned and appeared to be about to argue about it when he was struck by a painful cough. He leaned forward, his face contorted in a grimace as he pressed both hands to his stomach. He hesitated forward, a tumble in the foreseeable future if Mike was not there to support him.

In a few seconds Mike was no longer the only one around him. Lucas, Dustin, Max, and Sophie were muttering indiscriminate attempts to help him.

"Will? Will?!"

The boy took distance from Mike and the others, retreating until they hit the gaming machine. With their eyes glazed, the five watched their friend's cough last for another two or three minutes (what seemed like centuries) until everything was over.

"Will? Dude, how are you?"

Will blinked, stunned, as if he did not know where he was and who was speaking to him. And then his greenish eyes rested on Sophie. He seemed to be seeing in her something that no one else was seeing.

"I think I'm fine."

Mike helped him return to a less sickly posture.

"Come on, people." Will forced a yellow smile to offer the three boys and the two girls staring at him expectantly. "It was nothing. Believe me."

"It looked like you were going to vomit." Max said, clinging to Sophie's arm.

Will was not upset by that remark, he continued, forcing his relaxed posture.

"It was nothing, people. It's all right."

Will's "okay" did not convince anyone, just as it was with the "I'm fine" Mike always let go when it was El. Something was hopelessly wrong and everyone, even Sophie and Max who were the newest members of the group, They could notice that.

Notes for the Chapter:

I do not know if there is a curfew there where you live or if there is a time set by your parents or guardians for that. Here where I live it's completely out of the ordinary (we stayed out until the time we well understand, that is, if we are willing to take the risk of being the victim of an armed robbery). I'm sorry if I went much further with this curfew thing and I hope you're enjoying it.

Kisses with love.

9. Saying "yes" or "no" is not so simple

Summary for the Chapter:

He remembered one thing before throwing it back on the couch. Dustin's notepad. Mike rummaged through his pocket and found him there, waiting for him. He took the place he always occupied during D & D campaigns, curious to know Dustin Henderson's perspective on, well, everything. He flipped the object, not sure where to start. There was too much there.

Down the small flight of stairs with purposefully noisy steps. It was a tactic to alert his mother that he was already home and that he wanted to be alone - lately he had been doing this with a disturbing frequency. And, of course, it also served to overflow everything he felt. Fear, anger, confusion, longing ... The ladder suffered the consequences of this excess of suffocating feelings.

He threw himself on the old couch they kept in the basement, still disturbed by the scene that Will Byers had staged. The pain and fear that stung his face, the whiteness of his skin, the ominous noise coming from his dry cough ... All this ended the afternoon in the arcade. There was no more atmosphere, everyone was too scared to continue playing and so each one went back to his house.

Will was not well and that was not today. Mike knew this a long time ago, more specifically, since his friend had been discharged from the local hospital. Initially everything was fine, but then the little changes started to come out of nowhere, literally. It was small things that were there to cause great discomfort to those involved - angry attacks sometimes as irrational as those Mike had, coughing fits, headaches (at times it was as if Will was far away from them) and an uncommon irritability to someone Who once supported every kind of provocation without a single reaction.

Mike did not touch the subject with anyone, out of sheer fear of ...

What exactly was he afraid of? Of bothering Will, of touching an open wound of his friend, or of touching his own wounds, which he had won since everything had happened? Both options were quite feasible at the time, but that was not important. The important thing was that he was sorry he had chosen not to talk about what was happening to Will. What if it was something bad? What if this something that was leading you on a path with no return?

But he could not do anything, could he? He had not been brave and strong enough to save El, he had lost her. Not even El, with all the strength she had, was strong enough to save them and herself that night - she had disappeared along with the Demogorgon in a cloud of what appeared to be dust.

"Mike? Can I stay here with you?"

Standing at the top of the stairs, her blond head partially visible and her blue eyes shining, was Holly. He nodded, not stopping to think that the blonde's arrival would completely push him away from his line of reasoning.

"Yes you can." He gestured for her to approach. "Is there a problem, Holl's?"

The little girl sat down at the foot of the couch where her big brother was sprawled, legs and arms crossed.

"I do not think I'm Maddie's friend anymore."

Mike straightened up, recognizing the tearful tone that stained the words of the youngest.

"Maddie ... Madeleine Avertt, your little friend?"

Mike remembered the dark-haired, little-brained little girl who had been following Holly from side to side.

Holly sniffed.

"She's not my friend anymore. She's a ... a big sill." She lowered his

head. "I never want to see that geek again! The biggest fool of all, that's what she is."

Holly, four years old, bordering on five, was ten times more genial than her two brothers at that same age. That was what Karen Wheeler used to grumble when her daughter was in the midst of an unexplained crying crisis, and according to her, Holly's uncontrollable genius would still put her in various kinds of trouble. Mike could not disagree with his mother.

"I find that difficult, considering she lives in the house next door, Holl's." She joked, hoping for a giggle as an answer since Holly was highly likely to laugh. Anything. The girl gave no reaction. "What did she do to upset you? Did she pull your hair? Did you steal your doll?"

The blonde waved in dismay.

"Her sister called you a loser," she murmured, feeling Mike's dark eyes on her. "I told you she was a liar and I kicked her leg. I also kicked Maddie because she did not say anything, did nothing to help me defend you."

Who was Avertt's eldest daughter? Oh yeah! Samantha Avertt, the brunette almost as popular as Jennifer Hayes. The "almost-as-popular" existence was the big problem in her life, and that made her bitter with all her classmates, especially Mike, whom she had liked to imply since kindergarten.

The brunette had never paid much attention to the concept that people had of him. "So what if they thought he was a loser?" It was his life, no one else's - but that did not stop him from resenting Avertt's daughter. Not because she had called him a loser (this was not the least if he took into account what Troy called him), but because he'd involved Holly in a school idiot.

He straightened his posture, still lying on the couch.

"Holl's looking at me." He asked uneasily for her sister's reaction. "Look at me, Holly."

Holly mumbled a small sequence of incoherent childish words before

finally accepting her brother's request. His reluctance at that moment was obvious and his motive, in a way, justified. Quiet, steady tears stained the blonde face of Wheeler.

Mike felt his stomach turn. He had already witnessed several crises of Holly's crying, but none of them resembled the one he saw at that moment. Holly was a noisy child, and it applied as much to her moments of joy as to rage; Those silent tears did not match the little one with the golden hair.

"Maddie's sister is an idiot." Holly nodded fervently in agreement with what her brother was saying. "But that does not mean Maddie is an idiot either."

The blonde woman exclaimed in protest, evidently annoyed. The little girl already gave evidence of being the most genius of the Wheeler brothers, who, incidentally, had a highly flammable genius.

"You cannot blame her for something her sister did" he said quietly. "Maddie and no longer being her friend because of something her sister said in front of her is silly. Besides, doing this is not going to change what her sister thinks and talks about me."

"But it's wrong! She cannot leave saying that you're a loser. You are not a loser, you are ... you are my brother, that's all."

She sighed with the blonde's ingenuity. How could he tell her that, yes, he was a loser - the greatest of all - and that all his friends were also considered that way?

"Holl's, do you think I'm a loser?" An idiot?"

She frowned, confused by the question.

"No! Sometimes you're a fool, yes, but never a loser or an idiot."

He could not help but feel flattered by Holly's concept of him. She was probably the only one thinking this way, but still ..

"Not everyone thinks so, and that's okay," he added quickly, reaching for the blonde's blue eyes. "Why I do not care what people think and say about me. I know who I am and what I am; That's what matters.

"But it's wrong! She cannot go around calling you a loser. She's being mean."

He took a deep breath. Holly was being tougher than expected. Was every child so difficult or was it restricted to his sister?

"I do not care what that idiot says and you should not call either. She's just an idiot. Most people are like that," he continued after a pause. He was beginning to struggle to continue the conversation. "You think your friend is an idiot?"

Holly pondered for a moment before letting out a timid "no."

"Tomorrow you will talk to your little friend and apologize to her." He leaned dangerously on the edge of the couch. "It's okay like that?" The girl nodded absently. "Will not answer me?" She rose from the couch. "That's all I have left ... Do it!"

He lifted Holly off the ground and whirled around in her arms, satisfied with the squeals of delight that her sister let go every time he turned her around without leaving the place. He liked Holly's laughter echoing through the cellar that had been strangely empty for the past year.

The place had grown melancholy ever since El had gone out-it was as if her presence were essential for there to be something true there. The room was once just Mike and his friends now had El as the owner; That was her place, and the thick blanket was a reminder of that. But El was not there to take his rightful place. She was lost, far enough away that no one could find her, and to see that she still missed him in an incomprehensible way.

He stopped suddenly, dizzy with the tightness he felt in his chest.

"Mike, are you dizzy?"

He smiled a small smile on his face.

"Not even close to that, Holly."

Mike threw the younger sister on the couch and began what would have been a long tickle attack if Karen Wheeler had not interrupted

them.

"Children." She called them. "It's time for dinner. Wash your hands and come to the table."

He let out the blonde who, dissatisfied, grumbled to the mother to put in her baby's seat for which in two, maybe three months, would be too big. Mike blushed as he sat next to Nancy, still too embarrassed that she had witnessed one of her nightmarish attacks to look into her eyes.

"And then, Michael," Karen began, busy cutting Holly's dinner into little pieces. "Did you have a good day at school?"

He nodded without hesitation. *My new friend quarreled with Troy, she saved me from public humiliation during literature class, and Will had a very strange coughing attack in the middle of the arcade. You know, the usual.* It was irrelevant to tell all this to her. No, he did not need to fill his mother's head with problems that only concerned him and his friends.

"Yes mom."

And he did not say anything else. No one said anything other than mere formalities only addressed to strangers. Was that what they were? A bunch of strangers? Frankly, it all went beyond the common level of the pathetic. He ate in silence, and when he finished, he returned to the basement claiming to be uninterested in the dessert.

He remembered one thing before throwing it back on the couch. Dustin's notepad. Mike rummaged through his pocket and found him there, waiting for him. He took the place he always occupied during D & D campaigns, curious to know Dustin Henderson's perspective on, well, everything. He flipped the object, not sure where to start. There was too much there.

Sophie Eileen:

* *Brown eyes*

* *Glasses (are they of degree or are they just a big lie to cover up the truth?)*

** Short hair*

** Past uncertain*

** Courageous*

** Kind*

** Intelligent*

** Do not like Troy*

** Strange behavior when questioned about something*

He blinked. How so strange behavior? Sophie was a normal person, who behaved normally.

** Supposed Sheriff's niece Hopper from Manhattan (there's no proof of that, is there?)*

** Why did she come to live in Hawkins? Why does she live with her uncle and not with her parents? Where are her parents? Why does she act like she's hiding something (maybe she is, but that's just my speculation) Why approach us strangers when she had a range of choices?*

There was Sophie Eileen's "criminal record." Dustin had known Sophie for less than a week and had been able to detail the girl with commendable perfection.

With a weary sigh, he leafed through the small notebook until he found what he wanted; The plug that contained the characteristics of El under Dustin's vision.

Eleven/ "El":

** Short hair (now probably smaller than Max's, but larger than it was before)*

** Brown eyes that seem to know all your sins*

** Do not like Troy*

** Likes Mike. She likes Mike very much.*

He felt himself blushing at the prospect of El feeling some kind of affection for him.

** Very brave (she faced the demogorgon! If this is not the courage, I do not know what it is)*

** Intelligent*

** Limited vocabulary*

** Did she really live her life in a lab? Where are her parents, why did they let them do bad things to her? What is the purpose of everything that happened last year? Where did the powers that she have come from? What did you do with her in that place? Did they really create it to be a weapon, just like Mike hinted last year at the old iron? What did she do to the demogorgon, she killed him and went with him?*

He drank every word Dustin wrote, and he did it with greater eagerness as they began to refer to El. The questions written there were pertinent - far more than pertinent - and converged with Mike's line of thought. He laughed with the coincidence.

"Mike, dear? I can enter?" The questioning came just after a sequence of subtle, almost inaudible, knocking on the door. "Please, dear..."

He closed the pad with a thud.

"Come in, Mother!"

Karen came down the small flight of stairs with dexterity, her hand holding a small porcelain plate and lips with a maternal smile. She was a distinct woman, and as much as she did not share the same thought, it was obvious that the basement was not her place. Hawkins was not her place.

Mike knew his mother had the potential - her sisters also had that potential - and he did not understand why she chose to be a simple housewife when she could actually have had everything she wanted. Karen Wheeler could have the world at her feet, but she had chosen to stay in Hawkins.

"Hi Mom. Some problem? I ... Is it time to go to sleep?" He glanced at

his watch on his wrist, confused.

Karen did not respond at once, taking the time to push the porcelain plate to Mike and take a seat beside him.

"I came to bring you your dessert." The woman's eyes took on a playful glow. "Or are you still going to insist on this sharp talk of not wanting dessert?"

He peered into the porcelain plate and felt his mouth salivate with desire. Covered chocolate cake and a scoop of vanilla ice cream.

"No, I will not do that, Mother. I would be crazy if I dismissed this here, " He added urgently, desperate to taste the sweetness.

Karen's dark eyes appraised his son as he greeted himself with the dessert late. Mike lately was a little happier, right? She rubbed the fabric of the dress she wore. Who was she trying to fool? No, Mike had not been happier, far from it-he was just less unhappy. Considering the sadness in which her boy had sunk, it was already an immense advance.

Every night after putting Holly in bed, Karen prayed to the sky for Mike to be what he was before, to have the old glow he had in his eyes again.

She was not silly, she knew something had happened and that something had changed her boy. This something could only be the girl he'd covered up for a whole week. That's why Karen also returned her prayers to that girl who had ventured with Michael and his friends. Karen did not know her, did not even know her name, but she was important to her boy and that was all that mattered to Karen. She asked that the girl with no name be well and that Mike surpassed her, which he was far from doing. The boy was her persevering, the most enduring of the three children who had generated, and that perseverance could sometimes be bad for him.

"Honey, what is this?"

Mike pulled the noteboard closer to him, suddenly suspicious.

"It's a Dustin thing." He hesitated, his mouth dirty with candy. That

was his mother, he could tell her. Well, at least a portion of what was happening he could tell. He asked for my help, but I ... I do not know if I can help him.

Karen processed her son's words strangely. Her son was not to hesitate, much less to deny help to a friend.

"Michael, there's something else you cannot tell me, is there?" Do not worry about denying the truth," She said gently. "You want to help him, dear, I know that, but there's something bothering you, preventing you from saying yes or no. Honey, I'm sorry, but I will not tell you what to do. This is your choice and you are free to do whatever you want. If your little head is very confused, if you cannot reason right, let your heart decide. When in doubt, always do that. "

He lowered his head until it was on the cold table. His heart was a lousy counselor; He knew nothing and always got him into huge confusion.

"It's difficult, mom" He mumbled against the table, his voice muffled.

"I know, my dear, I know."

Helping Dustin was not difficult; It was difficult even to have to deal with Sophie and El.

"You're smart, my love, but sometimes it's good to let your heart take care of everything. He's the best adviser in such situations. "

The woman caressed the son's black wires. She knew that Mike was in the middle of a stalemate, but he did not tell her anything, and there was only comfort. Her little boy had secrets and she could only try to lessen his anguish.

"You know, I've been thinking about spending this weekend at your grandparents' house. Do you want to come with me, or would you rather stay with one of your friends? "

He considered the question for a while. It would be good to leave Hawkins for a few days, to flee from one small town to another that was little bigger, but that people did not know. And his grandparents ... For more than two years that he had not seen and thought of it, he

had as much nostalgia for him as he did about him.

"Is Dad coming with us?"

Mike pursed his lips and Karen imitated him perfectly. He preferred to stay in Hawkins than to spend four hours confined in a car with his father, exposed to unpleasant questions.

"No," his mother replied dryly, without adding the reason. "Let's just go, your sisters and you, if you want to come with us."

"I want to go," he said hastily. Now his weekend's future was a little less hazy. "I miss grandpa and grandma."

Karen laughed getting up from the table. She had to go see how Holly was.

"I'm sorry too, dear." He stroked the boy's hair one last time. "Do not stay here until late, okay? Do you have class tomorrow."

He waited for his mother to leave the basement and start work. All right, he was going to help Dustin and his friends. He did not believe Sophie and El were the same person, but he was going to help them as best he could.

He scanned the notebook furiously, not caring about the sheets he was kneading or not kneading. After a long search for a pencil or pen (where were his things when they needed them? It looked as if they had been sucked in by Jabba the Hutt), he began to write giving more attention to four of the various points he wrote.

*Tattoo on the wrist (011)

* Nasal bleeding

* Likes Eggs

* She's still alive!

He traced a line lowered from the last point, the one that mattered most. He stood there, staring at the paper, hoping a solution would come up and solve everything. Mike waited for El or her voice to

come from somewhere, stating that she was really alive - and that she was fine.

10. When things start to get out of control

Summary for the Chapter:

And that was Hawkins, that's what this little town did to newcomers they did not like or were curious about-it oppressed them enormously without bothering about the after-effects that might arise from that oppression. Sophie was already succumbing to the looks that accompanied her wherever she went.

Notes for the Chapter:

I know it has nothing to do with the story but, I need to comment on how wonderful Pink's speech at the VMA was. My best friend and I were watching together and could not stand it and just fell into tears. It was simply exciting. I saw the truth in her words and saw the innocence in her daughter's smile. Pink has been able to restore the confidence of her daughter and thousands of others. What to talk about this woman besides that she is a queen, a true inspiration for the young girls who have to live in this increasingly oppressive society.

If you have not yet seen Pink's speech, I advise you to see it. It is inspiring in a wonderful way. Kisses and enjoy the chapter.

"I get it right? Are you saying you're going to help us?"

He nodded without much excitement. He was not in the mood for excitement. The only thing he wanted was to resolve the issues he was tied up so that at the end of the day he could lie down with his mind alone. The day had barely begun and he already wanted it to end. He was so tired that he was surprised that he had not fallen asleep during the day's classes.

"That's it." He stopped walking to look at his friends. "Exactly."

Dustin smiled, displaying his definitive teeth acquired over the past few months. The curly smile was full of conceit and said "I knew you'd help us, dude!"

Lucas, always suspicious of everything and everyone, did not buy Mike's story immediately. He could almost hear the questions that surrounded Sinclair's mind, "why would someone as stubborn as Mike be surrendering so easily to an idea that had initially gone against his thoughts?". Mike could not blame his friend or be angry; he in Lucas's place would also be suspicious.

"Why did you chang ...?"

"It does not matter, does it?" Dustin interrupted him, the joy evident in his voice. "What matters is that Mike is within our plan. He pointed at the dark Wheeler. "He'll help us prove that Soph and El are the same person. Dude, Will will freak out when he finds out you're inside the whole thing."

Mike leaned against the closet door, promptly ignoring the hostile stares of the passersby and waiting for Will, Max, and Sophie to appear among them. The three of them had their last class together, and considering that old schoolteacher Greenburg - a lady known to hold students after hours - would probably not show up so soon.

He played with the notepad, considering whether or not what he was doing was right. No, of course it was true. Last night, after talking to his mother, he had made two decisions: He was going to help his friends with the Sophie / El question, even if it did not help, and was going to help Will Byers with whatever had been affecting him since his Return of the inverted world. He had made a decision and it was not time to give up.

"Since you talked about Will ... We need to talk about him."

Dustin wilted slowly as Lucas tried to deepen his frown. Here was an issue that was urgent to be addressed, but which everyone avoided at any cost. Talking about it was as uncomfortable for him as it was for others-it brought back memories full of anguish and storm-but it was no longer possible to postpone it. Things were getting too unsustainable.

"That was not normal, you know that as well as I do," Mike said in a stern voice. "And we need to do something about it. You know, talk to Will and understand what's going on with him."

The two of them stirred at Mike's ultimatum.

"Yes, you're right, but-"

"But he does not want our help." Let's face reality, please? "Lucas replied, not very gently in his voice. This was everyone's thinking, but only Lucas was brave enough to expose it. "He does not trust any of us anymore. Will does not tell us anything but the superficial, does not let us help him and sometimes it seems that he is not even with us."

Mike understood with that line of thought and knew that Dustin did too. There was days, especially when they were playing D & D, which Will did not seem to be seeing. Byers's gaze became continually lost, and when he returned to his normal state, he acted as if nothing had happened; As if the friends' concern was completely unnecessary.

"And what are we going to do? Are we going to let him keep doing this?" He asked fervently. Mike's voice was loud, so loud that it attracted the eyes of passing students. "We have to help Will, even if he does not want to. He is our friend."

Lucas made a little noise with his mouth. The fact is that it was the first time in a long time that he saw Mike acting with such energy. It was good to have a glimpse of old Mike who was always willing to take the lead.

"Okay, and what can we do and how could we do it? You know this has to be planned, does not it?"

Mike considered the matter seriously and once again saw that Lucas was right beside him. "When was this kid not right? Things had to be done carefully. They could not just approach Will and say, "Hey, man, what do you have, are you dying?" Definitely not. The subject demanded subtlety.

"I do not know, maybe we can ..."

He hesitated, and at that moment hesitatingly saw Will and Max approaching. They had no time to dig deeper into the subject they were discussing.

He frowned. Will and Max did not look very well. The two, with expressions of fear, jostled whoever stood in their way. Will was pale, his greenish eyes wide and Max, who did not follow far behind, had his red threads messed up in every possible direction. Jesus, the class of Greenburg teacher must have been hell.

Mike waited to see Sophie's condition, certain that the girl was following behind the two friends. But she was not after Will and Max; there was no sign of it. Okay, something was really wrong.

"Where's Sophie?" Max asked hoarsely, his blue eyes filled with savagery. "Did you see her?"

They stammered negatively, all in a shaky voice. They were getting nervous at Will and Max's agitation.

"Damn it!" Will swore loudly. "She was with us, but she disappeared. Before she disappeared it looked like she was freaking out with something." He looked around, as if expecting Sophie to come out of nowhere with her calm smile. "We passed the AV room to talk to Mr. Clark, and when she saw him, she just started freaking out. He said he was not feeling very well and just ran away."

Max paced back and forth, had Sophie's backpack in his hands, and held her close enough to keep his knuckles white.

"We need to find her. What if Soph fainted or if ... if Troy found her. I heard him earlier and he was saying he already knew how to take revenge on her. We know that Troy knows revenge on who he does not like and, as much as Soph knows if he does well during a verbal argument, I doubt she knows how to defend herself by punching or even punching."

Mike could almost hear the unmistakable note of desperation in Max's voice. She really cared about Sophie.

"Let's split up and find her, she's still at school." The redhead looked

at her friend's backpack as she spoke the last part." Mike and Will, you look in the music room and the library; Lucas, you look in the bleachers and at the swimming gym, Dustin, you and I are going to check out the largest number of rooms and the dining room." She paused for breath. "If we do not find her in half an hour, we'll have to call her uncle."

Mike did not wait for any further orders, walked off to the destination set by the redhead. Will followed in silence, both of them too apprehensive to exchange more than three words.

The music room was basically a bright, well-lit room with chairs and instruments arranged in a circle. They did not have to linger around to know that Sophie was not there.

The library, unlike the music room, would require a more thorough search of the two. It was a large room, made up of reading seats and, of course, several bookshelves. The shelves were tall, crammed with books of various kinds and authors - a full plate for anyone who wants to hide from something.

Will wrinkled his nose at the place. He was not the kind of library geek but the kind who loved electronics and comic books.

"Is she here?"

Mike did not answer, heading for the librarian. If Sophie was there maybe the woman had seen her, right?

"Excuse me; did you see a short-haired girl come in here?"

The woman, who was reading a water-sugar romance, did not look up to respond. In fact, to the strangeness of Wheeler, she already seemed accustomed to that kind of question. Apparently it was common to seek shelter in the library.

"There's a girl in the romance section," she informed him without flexing her voice. "I do not know if that's what they're looking for." Do not take too long there; the library closes the doors in thirty minutes.

As the woman had not been of great help - she could be talking about

any girl; she had not been anything but nice and far less specific-they decided there was no need to express gratitude to her. They just drove to where she'd directed them.

Already they could hear the person hiding there two bookshelves before the novel section. No doubt it was a girl and, judging by sobs punctuated occasionally uttered that she was not very happy. Mike wished Sophie was not the owner of those painful sobs - he did not like to see anyone in tears, especially if this was someone who had been as friendly as Sophie.

Unfortunately the sobbing girl was Sophie. They found her curled up against the wall, the light violet dress scattered around her without care, her head lowered and her hair completely messed up as if she cared nothing. There was a bright lilac book beside her, but she seemed too immersed in her own sadness to notice it.

"Soph" Will's voice squeaked. "You ... Are you okay?"

Sophie sobbed in response. Mike rolled his eyes and rewarded him with a punch in the arm. Of course the girl was not well, she was crying and that was a clear sign of that.

"I want to go home." They heard her muttering hoarsely. "This is not my place. My house..."

Mike caught his breath as he realized what was happening. She wanted to go back to Manhattan, to her real home. Sophie was not adjusting to Hawkins.

He looked at Will for answers. Anything. The boy remained paralyzed, looking genuinely terrified at Sophie's tears. Mike could not blame him, the first time he'd seen Nancy cry so fervently he'd been in complete panic. At that time he simply did not understand the reason for so many tears, which had hurt his sister until that eruption of tears.

"You do not like it here, is that it?" Mike asked as he sat down beside her and waved Will to do the same.

Sophie nodded in a weak negative.

"It's not like that, I like it here, really, but ... I do not feel welcome, everyone here does not seem to like me and my uncle, everything, absolutely everything we do is criticized." She hugged herself more firmly. "I'm not stupid or deaf. I hear the comments they make about me and my uncle, the looks ... I do not know if people are not subtle or if they do not bother to be subtle."

And that was Hawkins, that's what this little town did to newcomers they did not like or were curious about-it oppressed them enormously without bothering about the after-effects that might arise from that oppression. Sophie was already succumbing to the looks that accompanied her wherever she went.

"People look at me like I'm a zoo animal and the way they look at my uncle ... He's the sheriff, yeah, he might be, but people look at him with judgment. As if he had done something wrong." Sophie's voice trailed off. "In Manhattan none of this happened, people took care of their lives without caring about the lives of others. None of this happened when my mother was still here when she was with me ..."

Mike winced as he was overcome by a new wave of understanding. There was something behind that "here," otherwise Sophie would not have said it in such pain. Now the reason for Sophie's move to Hawkins was no longer a mystery; she probably did not have anyone but Jim Hopper.

"But it's your place here," Mike said cautiously. He was dealing with a girl and girls were hard to deal with. "This is where your uncle is. You like him, right? If you go away, if you go back to Manhattan you will not be able to stay close to him. You'll stop being the novelty of the city, Sophie, especially now that you're walking With us, believe me. No one pays much attention to us."

Sophie sniffled a little before lifting her head to look at them. She was without her glasses, and her drooping brown eyes were as expressive as El's. They expressed the same confusion and anguish that Mike was accustomed to seeing in Eleven's eyes. It was as if she were there on his forehead. Those were El's eyes.

"Are you better?" Will asked in a trembling voice. "You know, you're not going to cry anymore?"

Usually such questions attracted a new round of tears and regrets on anyone, but Sophie was not anyone; she was the big-city girl, the cute-haired girl who surprised without making an effort for it. And so she did as she let out a faint giggle of what might be seen as embarrassment.

"You must think I'm a crying baby." She moaned loudly, the mournful tone. "I'm sorry you guys witnessed this ... I think I might call it an attack. I'm an idiot for making you witness all this."

"No need to apologize."

"Yeah, we're your friends. We're here for this, okay? And you're no idiot or a crying baby."

They stumbled over the choice of words, making her smile yellow.

"You're my friends." She sighed wearily. "Thanks for this."

Mike and Will got up off the floor and Sophie, putting her glasses on her face and putting the little lilac book on the floor, followed them in footsteps. She crawled behind the two friends and sometimes they had to stop to wait for her. This behavior seemed to confuse Will, but Mike knew what was happening.

Stop crying did not mean she was okay – It meant she was controlling herself. But even though he was controlling himself, there seemed to be something far from over, something like pain. He slowed the pace so that he could be close enough to question her about it.

"Look who I just found, just who I was looking for. That's what I call lucky. "

Mike moaned loudly until he was at Sophie's side as Will, in a rush of courage, stepped forward, his green eyes fixed on Troy. The bully's smile had a clear message "you are screwed, suckers!"

Because once in a lifetime things could not work out for them? It was so simple and it was not even asking too much. It was just to find Sophie and take her away before Troy found her. Nothing difficult ... Or at least it should be.

"Go away, Troy," Will barked boldly. "Go take care of your life!"

Troy laughed out loud, not at all shaken by what Will had said. Mike looked around, desperate for some professor to come and get out of that situation. Sometimes they could get lucky. Anything. The corridor remained empty. Okay, since they were unlucky, the only way was to face the situation.

"You do not command me, Byers. Shut up and get out of my way. "He shoved Will and, in slow steps, walked over to Sophie and Mike. "We need to talk, sweetheart, you know, to sort things out between us."

Sophie stiffened at the closeness between her and the bully, her hand flying toward Mike's arm for support. Out of the corner of her eye, Mike noticed that the pallor that Sophie had displayed before was still there, but that, along with it, was the glow and impertinence of someone who would not even be intimidated. The helpless, tearful girl minutes ago was forgotten in the recent past, and there was someone in her place ready to face whatever lay ahead.

"I have nothing to talk to you, Troy, there is nothing that can be resolved between the two of us, there is nothing between us. "No" is definitely the word of the time and get used to it; You'll hear her often if you keep insisting on talking to me. "Sophie squeezed Mike's arm with every word she said. There was a plea at her close touch, a silent call for help. "Now, if you'll excuse us ..."

Troy, his face surprisingly calm, did not let the girl's actions go blank. He was aware of every move of her and of Mike as well. He judged them as if they were the prey and he the hunter.

"Frog face, you got a girlfriend!" Troy smiled wickedly. "I always thought you were gay like Byers, I thought you were going to date, but you look astonishing me!" You're dating four eyes. You guys make a couple ... interesting? It's definitely interesting.

Mike glared at him, clutching Sophie's arm to give her all the support she needed.

"Shut up, Troy," he growled as confidently as he could. Whenever possible Mike avoided direct confrontations with Troy but since last

year he was no longer afraid and if necessary he would face it in any situation. "Shut up, or you might end up pissing again. Caution."

He steadied Sophie without fearing an overreaction in response; Her arm was covered with a coat, there was no direct contact and so no strange reactions.

"Susan Eileen," Troy said suddenly, ignoring Mike and the joke. It was as if the name, in his mouth, was a dangerous weapon. "Susan Adele Eileen."

Mike felt the girl stiffen, her breath no longer tidy and lost in chaos near the onset of hyperventilation. He did not know any Susan Eileen but, judging by his surname, the woman was Sophie's relative. Her mother, maybe.

"What did you say? How ... How do you know about her?"

Troy folded his arms, victorious.

"Now you want to talk to me?"

"What do you know about her?"

"You said you had nothing to talk to me about, and now it fills me with questions." A little contradictory, do not you agree with me, Frog face?"

"WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT MY MOTHER ?!" Sophie screamed without bothering to control her tone.

So that was the name of her mother. It was not necessary to be a genius to know that Susan Eileen had not had the best of destinies and that it had shocked her daughter in an incomprehensible way. Mike could feel Sophie trembling and could almost feel the frenzy of feelings that lay inside her. No doubt something terrible had happened between Sophie and her mother before the girl arrived in Hawkins.

"Let's see, I know your apartment is on fire, I know you were the only survivor and I know that no one but Sheriff Hopper wanted to be with you. Your mother died burned, like a piece of coal, there was

nothing left to tell her story." He leaned forward a little, his tone full of false comprehension. "Did you kill her? Yeah, just a curiosity, you know. Look, if you really killed her, I swear, I will not blame you for anything. I saw a picture of her, she had a bit of a bitch, your mother..."

"DO NOT TALK ABOUT MY MOTHER! DON'T TALK ABOUT WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW, IDIOT!"

Mike found it difficult to contain Sophie. The girl, even weakened, was a true force of nature. Somehow, she managed to get away from Mike, threw the lilac notebook, and made her way toward the confronter.

It took Mike a moment to realize what was happening. With the fury that Sophie was (which was not unjustified) it was clear that she wanted to beat Troy. She could not do that, if she did she could be kicked out of school. He ran to grab her and stop her from making the biggest mess of them all.

"It's not worth it, Soph" He said desperately so that she could hear the voice of reason and ignore the rage that consumed her. "That's what he wants, so he's talking those things about his mother. If you do this you will be harming yourself, you may be expelled from school. Will, man, a little help here, please. Come on, listen to me. You know your mother was not that, does not give the attention he wants."

Sophie hunched a few more times before she calmed down. Will, meanwhile, was busy picking up Sophie's little book.

"You're right, Mike. He's not worth it," she murmured breathlessly. "It just is not worth it. You can let me go now, I promise I will not try to do any more bullshit ... HEY!"

This seemed to finally get Troy out of his calculated calm and Mike, busy seeing if her friend was really well, did not see it; He did not see him come forward like a rabid pit bull, did not see the flaming hatred in his eyes. The only thing he saw was a reluctant and frightened Sophie being dragged away from him without any kindness.

"Let me go," she growled, twisting her wrist in an attempt to escape

the grip the bully was inflicting on her. “ Let go of me, Troy!”

“Let her go, Troy! She is a girl. Are you going to start beating defenseless girls? Is he such a coward?”

“Put her down!”

“SILENT, TWO!” Troy silenced them all with a single cry. "Equal rights, is not it? She's going to pay me and fuck herself if she's a girl. Seriously, she does not even look like a girl. If it was not for this dress I would not know you're a girl. Byers is more feminine than you. Frankly, are you really a girl? It does not look anything like one.”

Sophie let out a shriek of agony, kicking harder than ever.

"Let me go, please ..." She gasped as if he were short of breath. “Let me go!”

"Look how cute she can ask please” Troy scoffed. "Repeat for me, sweetheart, repeat and maybe, I said maybe, let you go."

The girl let out a new grunt, this time more desperate. Mike's heart clenched as he looked so helpless suddenly. What could he do to help her?

“Let me go!”

"I said I wanted to hear a "please", sweetie. Without these two words we will not have an agreement.”

“Let her go, Troy.”

“LET ME GO, PLEASE!”

Mike, desperate to silence the sound of Sophie's screams, brought both hands to his ears. Her screams caused great agony. She had a loud voice, sharp and painfully desperate. With eyes half closed and feeling an absolute horror growing inside him, he saw Sophie have a set of desperate reactions.

First there was a kick, a kick in a really sore place that only boys had.

Troy howled loudly, both hands pressing the sore spot. The second move was completely unexpected and caught everyone by surprise, including Sophie. Her hand, locked in a small ball of rage, flew over to hit Troy's nose with a straight punch.

The world stopped for a few seconds, everyone was perplexed by what had happened. Troy had been punched by a girl, *by a girl*.

"Oh my God, I punched you in the face." Sophie stepped back, stunned. She shivered from head to foot, her eyes fixed on blood flowing from Troy's nose. " I ... I'm sorry ... I mean, I do not really feel, I ... you deserved it, you know ... Oh my God! *Damn, Damn, Damn, Damn!* My uncle is going to kill me!"

"Shut up, bitch! Just shut up your fucking mouth!"

Sophie did not listen to Troy, she continued to retreat without a certain destination. She did not seem to be aware of anything around her; Seemed lost.

Mike shook his head and ran to her side. They needed to get out of there with urgency, they would be in trouble if any teacher or monitor found them there, in that situation not very pleasant to explain. They needed to run away from the crime scene.

"Soph" He muttered trying to attract her attention. "We have to go..."

"HEY YOU! WHAT IS HAPPENING THERE, THEIR TROUBLEMAKERS?! JESUS! IS THAT BOY BLEEDING?!"

Mike Wheeler snorted, not looking to see who their executioner was. Shit, we're so screwed.

11. The girl from Manhattan bleeds and cries with sadness

Summary for the Chapter:

He was partially aware of everything that was going on (despite agreeing on gender and degree with Sheriff Hopper's words), the mind traveling to what was about to happen. Joyce Byers had not yet seen Sophie's face, and surely, when she saw it, she would make the same assumption that everyone had been doing; that Sophie and El were the same person. Will's mother had met El and had come to mourn the disappearance of the girl - of course his pain did not stand out the joy of having his son back.

Mike bit his lower lip and felt the metallic taste of blood come up a few seconds later.

It was the second time in two years that Mike was going to the principal's office that number was too high for a guy like him. The first time he had been outside to be questioned about his best friend's disappearance; now Will was there, sitting next to him, and they were both in trouble. Jeez! The things were getting out of control. He took a quick glance at the principal to see what he was doing - he was busy studying a sequence of papers, his bald head glistening with a few drops of sweat - and then he turned to Sophie.

Since they had arrived there she had said nothing beyond what was necessary, in this case, to answer some questions asked by the director. She was sitting between Will and Mike, her head lowered and her feet uneasy, giving little kicks in the air. Despite having short hair Sophie knew how to make good use of it to hide herself and realize that it filled Mike with panic. Was she crying again?

"Are you okay?" Mike asked timidly.

She denied, to Mike's absolute terror.

"I'm just having a little headache. Soon it passes, it's always like this."

She sighed. "That's normal; you do not have to worry about me."

Mike raised an eyebrow at the answer. Sophie's voice sounded strange, more restrained and silent than usual. On the other side of the seat they shared, Will frowned, also surprised by the reaction.

"Interesting." The director suddenly said, startling both Mike and Will; Sophie remained motionless, a statue of adverse feelings. "Except for Mr. Troy, who is in the infirmary recovering from the ... oh, little misfortune that's happened to him, you all have good grades and excellent demeanor. Mr. Byers, you have excelled in arts classes and that is something to be proud of. Mr. Wheeler, your grades are exceptional, and the compliments that Mr. Clark weaves about you fit perfectly with the notes I see. And Miss Eileen ..."

The three teenagers plunged into uncomfortable silence, not knowing where the director wanted to get with it - was he, after all, praising them or just citing the merits of each randomly?

"Miss Eileen, your school record is exceptional. You've had home-based classes since the beginning of the school year and you've only gotten directly involved with others your age for less than four months, right?"

"It was better this way," she murmured softly.

Mike frowned and saw Will do the same thing. Homeschooling? Why the hell she had been educated at home?

"I see, I really do understand and I'm very sorry." The director looked at the girl with kindness and ... pity. Why he looked so pious with her? "But that did not hurt her, did it? You excelled in every area you were taught. And extracurricular lessons ... French, botany, singing ... *Jouez n'importe quel instrument?*"

It took Mike a few seconds to realize that the director had just questioned Sophie in another language. French. For a brief moment he wished he had not chosen Spanish as an extracurricular class just so he could understand what the principal had just said. It was clearly a questioning, the tone of voice he used made it very explicit, but what exactly was he questioning? About what had happened?

Argh! Since Mike hated not to understand what was happening, he felt like a child again, witnessing the conversation between two adults and completely oblivious to the seriousness of what was happening. It was so frustrating.

"*Ne pas*" Mike panicked. That was a "no", right? Sophie moved her hands so that the bloody side (Troy's blood) was visible. "I do not play any instruments, sir, but I wanted to get to the piano someday."

Sophie shook her head, a movement with no real meaning that shook her brown threads. It was almost mesmerizing to stand there, seeing those short, almost curly strands moving so smoothly ... It was Mike's turn to shake his head. What was he thinking ?! What nonsense was that of admiring Sophie ?! He was going crazy, completely out of his mind. The board atmosphere was definitely not doing well for Mike Wheeler.

"I do not think you're the kind of person who starts a fight without a reason to justify everything." The director leaned forward, longing for answers. "Could you explain what motivated you to ... attack Mr. Troy?"

Sophie lifted her head and looked directly at the director. She was not crying, but she was not too far away either. The drooping brown eyes, hidden behind the glasses, glowed uneasily. She seemed convinced of what she had done, no regrets in sight.

"He talked about my mother said horrible things about her." She stared at him blankly and then repeated: "He talked about my mother. *My mother.*"

"He also tried to hurt her" Mike added hastily, still sore at the way Troy had treated Sophie. She was a girl and a girl could not be treated so violently, that's what Karen Wheeler had taught her from a very early age. A girl could not be hurt by a boy, it was cruel to do this to someone physically smaller and weaker. "It was hurting her."

"Troy deserved that" Sophie said confidently, then sighed. "Those who do not deserve all these are these two. Mike and Will do not deserve to be here. They did not do anything wrong. I hit Troy; not them. You can punish me at will and I will not complain because I deserve to be

punished, but ... they do not deserve it.”

Mike and Will protested in unison. They could not let her take the blame on her own. It was simple: if they were on the board together they would take the blame together. Sophie was one of them now and they would not abandon her, allow her to take the blame on her own.

He kept complaining, even in the face of the new reality that hit him. She was one of them. The girl had been in town so recently and was already a member of their small group of geeks. What was happening? How had this happened so fast?

It was just them, the four lonely strangers who kept each other company; and then El had emerged. El had emerged as the fifth member of the small group and he remained so, even missing. Max came in next, and she, no matter what the opinion of the other students or the boys themselves, joined them and had other, much better options. And finally, Sophie. The girl had appeared with the sole merit of being like El, but she had won them in less than a week, and of course, if it were proven that she was not El, they would still be friends with her (Mike doubted he and his friends could get along away from she, whatever the outcome of it all).

The director shook his head at the three teenagers wondering silently how two boys so small and skinny and a girl could make so much noise. In fact, the girl made no noise. She was the least noisy of the three.

“Enough, no more noise, all three!” He sighed in relief when silence reigned in the room. "One moment, please" he asked laconically, holding up a finger for the young men to wait as he answered the phone that had been ringing incessantly for the past two minutes.

Mike did not know how to predict the future-he could do that-but it was not necessary to have that human ability to know that the call signaled the arrival of his mother and the others in charge. Just thinking about being face-to-face with Troy's mother Mike felt a deep, irritating headache.

The first person to enter the room was a short, well-dressed woman,

followed by a perplexed Joyce Byers, a scowling Hopper Sheriff. Mike's mother was the last to show up, she was bringing Holly in tow, and seemed to be passing a long list of recommendations to her younger daughter (no doubt recommendations for her to behave while they were there).

Holly, who was too young to bother with good manners on certain occasions, let go of her mother's hand and, with a cry of charm, ran into the arms of her older brother. Mike was suddenly embarrassed by the arrival of his mother and sister. His mother must have been mortified at being called to the board.

"Hey, Holl's. Keep quiet, okay?" Mike whispered to his sister as he wrapped his arms around her. "Do not make noise. In a little while we're going home, yes?"

The blonde nodded, hid her face in the crook of her older brother's neck and, like the others, listened to what the adults had to say.

The headmaster loosened his tie around his throat uncomfortably.

"Thank you for the presence of all ..."

"Where's my son? Where's my Troy?" The short woman interrupted without any ceremony, her blue eyes searching hungrily for her son. "Where's my son?"

The director stared at her with no sympathy as the other adults looked at each other. Mike could have guessed that the director was not the number one fan of Troy's mother.

"Your son, Madam, has been teasing this young lady here." He pointed to Sophie, who, since her uncle's arrival, had kept her head down. All the courage she'd shown before had vanished into nothing. "And he even went so far as to physically assault her."

All the adults threw Troy's mother a look of reproach as the woman stammered any response. Hopper, whose countenance had closed the mention of his niece's almost aggression, seemed to be beyond fury - in fact, he looked very much like Hopper who had questioned him during Will's disappearance. The cold and scary Sheriff Hopper was

back.

Troy's mother, ignoring everyone, continued to stutter justifications for her son's behavior. She was a stubborn woman and refused to believe that her son had done anything like that-she always refused to accept that her son was an intimidator of the worst kind. For her it was always the fault of others and never of her dear Troy.

The director seemed to be looking for a way to continue, uncertain about how he should pass on the next information. Mike could almost see the gears spinning inside his head, searching for the kindest words possible.

"Unfortunately for your son, Madam, she knows how to defend herself like no one else."

Silence perpetuated the room. Hopper was the first to understand the director's words and the only one to sketch a reaction. A crooked smile, almost awkward, sprouted on his lips.

"Excuse me?" Troy's mother asked in a shaky voice, not believing what she had just heard. "What did this little girl do to my son?"

"She punched him!" Will said, a twinge of joy painting his voice. The boy shrank a little at the reproving look he received from Joyce. "Soph punched Troy." Yes, it was impossible to deny that this in Will's voice was not joy. Mike could not blame him; it was good to see Troy fucking himself after years of suffering in his hands.

Troy's mother blinked, absorbing the information.

"That little girl beat my son, is that it?" She asked harshly, her finger pointing. "Just because he said some things, child nonsense, she hit him ?!" She straightened up with royalty. "I demand that she be expelled! I demand that she and these boys be expelled from this school!"

Hopper, Joyce and Karen exclaimed in protest at the demand of the decompensated woman.

"Be in control, please!" The headmaster held up a hand to restrain them. Apparently the parents were as noisy as their children. "No

one's going to be kicked out of this school. He turned to Troy's mother as he spoke the next words. The only action I'll take here is the suspension of your son."

The presumption of Troy's mother had completely vanished, she seemed confused, as if the words of the schoolmaster did not suit her.

"What?! No! This strange girl hits my son and he takes suspension? This is completely insane!" The woman spread her hands on the director's desk, completely out of her mind. Holly, still in Mike's arms, was startled by the noise to the point of whimpering. "This girl is clearly upset, am I the only one in this room to notice that?"

"Be careful what you say about my niece, Madam; you may regret it.'

The woman turned to Hopper, her blue eyes filled with a cold, insane flame.

"Are you threatening me, Sheriff?" She hissed.

"On the contrary. I know my niece well enough to know she was only defending herself" Hopper said without making any attempt to retreat. He crossed his arms over his chest. "You cannot blame my niece for not letting her son hurt her. No man has the right to hurt her; Her mother and I taught her that and that's what she put into practice."

Mike tightened his grip around Holly and pulled her closer. His sister was smart enough to keep quiet during the crossfire, after all, she did not want to have any trouble left.

He was partially aware of everything that was going on (despite agreeing on gender and degree with Sheriff Hopper's words), the mind traveling to what was about to happen. Joyce Byers had not yet seen Sophie's face, and surely, when she saw it, she would make the same assumption that everyone had been doing; that Sophie and El were the same person. Will's mother had met El and had come to mourn the disappearance of the girl - of course his pain did not stand out the joy of having his son back.

"Unfortunately, Madam, I shall have to suspend your son for three

days. As it is the first time an incident with violence happens." The director looked at Mike and Will. "with a girl I will soften the punishment, but I do so by leaving it under you warns that if something happens again between your son and a student, I will be forced to expel him from that school. It's the rules."

Mike heard the woman mutter a sequence of not very kind words before showing understanding what the director had said.

"Right. Where's my son?" She asked sharply. "I want to take him home, where I will take care of him under my own terms."

"He's in the infirmary ..."

"Have a really bad day."

The mood was undeniably lighter after Troy's mother's theatrical departure, so much so that Holly, realizing it, moved to look at the environment with curiosity. She had not done this before (on arrival she had only had eyes for her older brother) and now she had the opportunity to see everything and everyone that was around her.

Holly greeted Will with a cheery "hey!" and nodded to the director as if he were an old friend. Noticing that Sophie was sitting next to her and De Mike, she let out an enchanted giggle and nudged the girl for attention. It was obvious that the little blonde had a great admiration for the Sheriff's niece.

"Hi, blond angel" Sophie whispered to Mike and Holly to hear. "Good to see you again."

This little comment made Holly exultant to the bridge of letting out small shrieks of joy. Sophie was able to reciprocate the excitement of Holly Wheeler with a sad chuckle.

"Holl's!" Mike squeezed his sister's waist as he received a warning look from his mother. "Behave yourself. You cannot scream in here."

The director nodded to the two brothers, still baffled by Troy's mother leaving. That woman definitely had a theatrical vein.

"Sorry for the inconvenience, Mrs. Wheeler and Mrs. Byers, I only

called you and kept your children here for mere formality. Her children did nothing, the incident happened only between this young lady and the ... son of that *lovely Lady*, but they witnessed everything and were in some way involved as witnesses." The director switched his gaze between the proud Sheriff Hopper and Sophie. "Sheriff, I'm sorry about what happened to your niece, and I ask you to orient her to no more such a reaction. If something like this happens again, if a student harasses you again, I ask you to address me or some teacher; violence is never the answer to absolutely nothing."

The Sheriff nodded solemnly, his blue eyes fixed on his niece for some reaction beyond his morbid silence.

"I understand perfectly, Principal. I'll talk to her about it. Come on, Soph." And then, when the girl did not move or gave hints that she would: "Sophie? Some problem?"

Mike was not surprised by the brief and visibly tortuous refusal. Of course she had a problem with her, it was as obvious as the sun shining in the sky.

"My head hurts a lot" Sophie said weakly. "It hurts..."

Mike probed a little more closely and then lost his breath. A trail of red drips that were not there before spotted Sophie's beautiful violet dress. Fresh blood. She drew Holly close to him again, afraid that her sister would see the little trail of blood. Holly was sensitive and would certainly make a big scandal with that. No, all they needed least were Holly's screams.

Luckily (the only lucky moment of the day), Mike was not the only one to notice the terrifying little detail. Karen Wheeler, who was closest to the three teenagers, nudged Hopper and Joyce to notice the same. Joyce looked confused but, Hopper, oh, that one paled immediately, his blue eyes growing in size. Mike thought he would not be alive to see Jim Hopper scared of something and to be witnessing this event was not being very enjoyable.

"Mike, dear, wait for me outside, right?" Karen asked in a shaky voice, and Joyce, following her example, asked Will to do the same.

With an annoyed Holly in her lap and a stunned Will, Mike did as his mother asked and went outside. He faced Max, Dustin, and Lucas waiting outside, anxious expressions. As soon as they were seen, they began a long barrage of questions. *What happened? Did Soph really make Troy unable to have children? Is Troy's nose broken? Where is Soph? Why is not she with you?*

Mike put his little sister down and, with the promise of an ice cream if she kept quiet, turned to her friends.

"I think there's something wrong with Sophie," he said in a low voice. "The kind that involves blood, her blood."

Max wrinkled his nose and looked at him as if he were a complete idiot.

"Maybe she has ... you know ..." Max's cheeks turned rosy. Mike had never seen her blush. "There is a time in the life of girls that things happen, changes ..."

The four boys moaned, mortified by her friend's words. They had understood her and definitely did not want to hear about it. Holly looked at them curiously.

"That's not it" Mike said hastily. "She was bleeding from her nose. Nasal bleeding and I think headache."

There was no need to say another word. The five of them crowded in the doorway, wanting to hear what was going on inside the room.

"Shut up, you bastards" Max hissed aggressively. "I want to listen. Look, if you do not shut up I swear I'll break into your house at night and shave off your damn hair!"

Mike closed his eyes to forget the world around him, ignore everything and focus on what was happening inside the room. Noises, misshapen sentences that sounded more like the sound the fish make under the water ...

"It hurt a lot ..." He heard Sophie moan weakly. "Very much ..."

He squeezed his eyes tightly, touched by the pain he heard in her

voice.

"It really hurts, my head looks like it's going to explode ..."

"I know, my dear, I know." He heard one of Karen's attempts to reassure Sophie. "On a scale of zero to ten, would you say that your pain is from ...?"

"Seven? Eight and a half? I do not know ... Unclee" She whimpered loudly. "I want to go home, Uncle Jim, please."

There was a movement inside the office, heavy and hurried footsteps.

"We're coming," Hopper comforted her, his voice reassuring. "Come here ... this! Put your head on my shoulder. That's right ..."

The five quickly moved away from the door. Hopper came out carrying Sophie in her lap, the girl completely still if it were not for the soft swing of her legs. Her face was not visible, so she could not say for sure whether she was conscious or not. Had she fainted? God, was she dead? No, of course she was not dead, that was an exaggeration. Mike hoped it was an exaggeration. Hopper did not speak to any of the five teenagers (not that they waited for it) - he went straight with stubborn blue eyes.

Mike looked away to see the pallor of his mother and Joyce Byers. The motive of both women's pallor was different - Karen was only frightened while Joyce, Joyce had seen a real ghost. She had seen Eleven, the girl they all thought was dead.

"Joyce, are you feeling all right?"

Mrs. Byers blinked, eyes out of focus.

"I'm fine, Karen, thank you. Will? Come on, yes, I have to talk to you about something."

And just like Will, Mike also went with his mother and sister. All that had happened was coming back in flashbacks as he drove home. Sophie crying in the library, Sophie kicking, screaming and punching Troy, Sophie in the confident board and then fading like a plant. The girl had shown several facets of herself that day.

Mike was not surprised to find his mother waiting for him outside the garage. Of course she wanted to talk to him.

"I'm sorry, mom, I did not want to get in trouble," he said, taking care of the bicycle in the garage. "But I could not leave my friend alone either, it would be cowardly of me."

Karen led the son into the house, aware that he was shaken by everything that had happened at school. She still regretted letting him ride home after all, but he was already a big boy and knew the way home like no one else.

"You did not do anything wrong, honey." She comforted him with kindness. "Your friend did not do anything wrong, either, if you'd like my opinion."

Mike stopped walking, did not want to talk about it in the house, not with the possibility of Ted Wheeler listening to him.

"Mother? What did she have?" Mike lowered his voice. "Is she going to be okay?"

"Mike, she'll be fine. Your friend seems to be a strong girl in every way."

Mike thought of the tears Sophie had shed, the genuine sadness she had seen inside her (had Will seen him the same as he?) She was definitely a strong girl, but even strong people need to collapse. No one is strong twenty-four hours; at some point the facade must fall and reveal everything.

It was a stupid thought to have at that moment but ... She was very beautiful. El was very pretty and Sophie, being the undeniable copy of El, was equally beautiful. For a moment Mike wanted to believe that the two were, in fact, the same person. Thinking this would make things much easier.

"You and your friends should visit her" Karen said, stroking the black strands of Mike's hair. She still had her heart broken with the scene she had witnessed, the tears of the sick girl, the way she complained about the pain ... "Not now, she needs to rest. Please visit her later,

and please be kind to her.”

Mike listened to her mother's words.

"Despite being a strong girl, she's going to be very upset. What she did at school, punching that boy, was a reaction of the moment; was completely unthought and that's where the problem is. She will stop to think and, dear, she will feel guilty.”

He frowned.

"Why? Troy deserved and she knows it. What she did was right." Mike paused for a moment. "Well, it was not really right, actually, it was a bit wrong to punch him in the face, but it was a well-deserved punch then ... That justifies everything.”

"It's not that simple, trust me.”

Nothing was simple. Holy shit! What was missing to happen? The way things were going would risk the demogorgon reappearing.

"And, my dear, I know this will sound a bit unexpected, but I've decided to anticipate our journey," Karen said looking uncomfortable. "I want you to pack your things, we'll leave early tomorrow." You can take whatever you want, comics, books; what you want and find that it can help you to get distracted during the trip.

Mike did not immediately agree with that. Of course he wanted to get out of town-it was one of the things he wanted most - but he wanted to do it when he had no more questions left. He wanted to talk to Will and see if Sophie was all right. Urgent matters that could not be postponed.

"But Soph..." He broke off. It was the second time he called Sophie by his nickname, and for someone who was initially so reluctant to accept it it was sounding eerily natural. "Mama, you said we should visit Soph. I was thinking of going to visit her tomorrow." *Very early*, he added mentally.

Karen nodded, her dark eyes studying his son with what was initially an innocent curiosity, but soon turned into undisguised delight. Mike blushed heavily as he saw a wicked grin brush his mother's lips. He

felt the sudden urge to dig a hole in the floor and stick his head in, to run into the house, lock himself in the room or the basement and not leave. But since he did not want to be labeled as mentally disturbed, Mike stayed exactly where he was, fighting the heat on his freckled cheeks and praying that he would soon be gone.

"Take it easy, my dear. Your friend needs some time to rest. It was an intense day for her today." The blonde pushed the black wires away from Mike's forehead. It was a nervous tic she had whenever she was near the boy. "Believe me: she will not get you or your friends tomorrow. She is hurt and scared; a visit now would only make it worse. She seems to be sensitive, dear, let her rest a little, forget a little about everything that happened. Do you understand what I mean?"

He wrinkled his lips. No, he did not understand what she meant - they even looked like they were speaking different languages, and for a moment Mike felt himself back in the boardroom with Sophie speaking French. But as his mother was an experienced woman, she nodded in a positive nod. His mother rarely made a mistake, and if she was saying that Sophie needed time, it was good to believe her and accept without question.

12. The daughter of Terry Ives

Summary for the Chapter:

Sophie took one look at her wrist and found the evidence there, what separated her from the rest of her age. 011. The small number engraved on Sophie's wrist, the dark paint contrasting against pale skin like neon lights in the dark, which she hid beneath bracelets and long sleeves. Sophie did not know why she had that thing on her wrist and ask her mother and uncle about it that had not worked. No one spoke to her; her life was a mess, a tangle of mismatched information.

She just could not contain the sense of apprehension that bit by bit took care of every member of her body. She wanted to scream, to expose to the three boys who accompany her how wrong and out of context was that scene they watched hidden in that cold and dark night.

He was alive, she knew it, but the boys did not know that and seeing that thing being pulled out of the water would surely think she had been lying in the last hours. But she had not lied, she was not a liar, and she did not like to imagine the black-haired boy thinking about her like that.

I did not lie, she wanted to tell him. Your friend is still alive, I can feel it. She, in fact, could still feel the boy. If she closed her eyes and concentrated well she would see him, running for her own life. His energy was weak, almost nonexistent, but it was still there. The energy varied between waves of fear and hopelessness. His life was on the line, and if no one believed her, he would probably die in less than two days.

She approached the black-haired boy and, uncertainly, took his shoulder and called his name. His name was all he could say, he could not utter anything other than his name. She just wanted him to see what she saw, that he could know that his friend was alive, at least for an hour. She wanted him to be in her world, in the world where things that were happening made sense.

His energy, of the dark boy with the face of freckles, who was wavering between anger and pain, gave her the hint that she needed to know the words she was about to receive. But she was, above all, stubborn and would not believe what all the facts indicated. If she had not been so stubborn, why else would she be standing next to him? Why else would he be putting his life in danger? She should leave as soon as possible, she should run away and secure her own safety. But she still had not done it and was not sure she would.

"You should help us find him alive. You said he was alive! Why did you lie to us? What's wrong with you? What's wrong with you?!" He, the freckled boy, shouted at the top of his lungs.

She drew back, startled by the aggressiveness that was directed at her. That question hurt like no other had hurt. The gentle boy had finally realized how wrong she was, had realized the abomination she was. She looked at him, her image growing blurrier as tears welled up ...

Sophie woke sobbing softly, the pain she felt in the dream tormenting her. Breathes and inspires, breathes and inspires. She gave up the damn calming technique taught by the psychologist when a new sob broke out without her noticing. It was not working, she was succumbing to ... what exactly? What was that overwhelming feeling that struck every time he woke from a dream?

She cupped her hand, terrified of the possibility of waking her uncle. No, she just could not do it to him again - it would be the fourth night in a row that disturbed him with the silly dreams he had. Dreams, it was just dreams ... If only she could write about the dream, it had always calmed her down, but she had lost her diary at school and could not get it back anytime soon.

She was not pretty like the other girls, both Manhattan and Hawkins. Sophie always had to work hard, to do her best to look like a girl, and yet some people insisted on confusing her with a boy. It always hurt when someone called her a "boy." She was not a boy, she was a girl who believed she was making this fact very explicit when wearing skirts, dresses and hair ties. Why did not people realize that?

What is wrong with you? The boy's question echoed again in Sophie's mind.

"Many things are wrong with me" she murmured to herself, her eyes fixed on the reflection in the mirror, longing not to be the person reflected there. Sophie wanted to be anyone but herself. Anyone was better than her.

She no longer had her mother near her, had never had a father, had a strange appearance with those strange scars that she did not even remember having acquired, lived having nightmares with a life that was not hers, had difficulty understanding some words or expressions, headaches and there were still constant visits to specialists she had to do - psychologist, speech therapist, doctors ... She was a completely wrong person.

Sophie took one look at her wrist and found the evidence there, what separated her from the rest of her age. 011. The small number engraved on Sophie's wrist, the dark paint contrasting against pale skin like neon lights in the dark, which she hid beneath bracelets and long sleeves. Sophie did not know why she had that thing on her wrist and ask her mother and uncle about it that had not worked. No one spoke to her; her life was a mess, a tangle of mismatched information.

Sophie wanted to be able to hate the boy of her dreams because he was so rude. He also wanted to hate Mike Wheeler, who looked so much like him. But she just could not do it. It did not seem right to hate the two freckled boys she had in her life. Both were hurt by something and hating them for it was wrong – When he looked at Mike, with his large dark eyes and his constellation of freckles, Sophie found herself completely unable to nourish a feeling as bad as hatred. How could she hate that visibly broken freckled boy? Something had broken Mike Wheeler's heart, she could feel it whenever she was near him.

She could not hold back and let out a small sob as she thought of Mike Wheeler and the friends he'd won over Hawkins. Now they probably hated her or were afraid of her, after she had dragged them to the board it was only fair that they felt that way.

She fell back, desolate. She lay there, sprawled on the carpeted floor, thinking how pathetic her existence was, until she was startled by a sound that sounded downstairs. She rose from the ground and, with a strange sense of apprehension throbbing in her chest, ran to see what was happening.

“...Tell me! It's her, is not it? And do not try to trick me, Hopper! I'm tired of your lies”

Soph did not have the guts to go downstairs and so he chose to stay there where he had an exceptional view of everything and everyone.

The small living room was surprisingly crowded with people. Her uncle, Hawkins' Sheriff, was sitting on the couch with a defeated air (he always seemed to feel this way and Sophie preferred to assign this to his job, after all, being a Sheriff must be exhausting). Sitting next to Jim Hopper was an acquaintance of his and Sophie's mother who had come to spend a day with them. Jacob "Jake" Wayfarer was an important investigative journalist in Manhattan who was spending a few days in Hawkins. He did not like Sophie, he had never said that to her directly, but the way he acted made that clear. Sophie did not return the feeling, but she did not miss the opportunity to tease him whenever possible. It was really funny to see Jake mumbling and acting like a teenager whenever she teased him.

And then there were the unknown people. A tall, pale teenager, dark eyes, messy brown hair, and hunched posture, as if he were trying to hide from the world. And she had a woman, she was short, she had the same brown hair as the boy, and in spite of her uncontrolled posture, her brown eyes were surprisingly full of affection, pain and ferocity. It was a strange combination of feelings.

Soph frowned, recognizing the woman. This was Will's mother. Oh, she gasped softly, she had come to complain to Jim Hopper about everything that had happened between Sophie and her son. Damn! She felt tears coming up.

“Jim!” The woman demanded fiercely. “Answer me!”

Soph watched the way her uncle seemed to wither.

"It's her, okay? It's the girl, the daughter of Terry Ives; It's Eleven... or Jane" he said harshly. "It's complicated, but in short, she does not know anything. Nothing about being Martin Brenner, nothing about the experiences, nothing about your son or the other kids; Nothing about what happened ..."

The woman mumbled about something and rummaged through her purse for something. Sophie frowned when she saw Will's mother pull a cigarette butt, she hated cigarettes and hated seeing someone with something as destructive as that.

"Explain yourself, *fast*."

"Martin Brenner, Hawkins's energy company, that strange thing that tried to kill your son; all this is a lot of nothing. She does not know, does not remember ... What is it, Jake?"

Hopper blinked when his friend nudged him.

"I think somebody's gossiping about this conversation." Jake pointed to the stairs revealing Sophie's location. "Is not it, child? Kindly come down here, please."

Sophie followed Jake's request, a little annoyed at being discovered, and went downstairs. She ran past Mrs. Byers and ran into her uncle's arms. The room was silent for a few seconds, as if they were absorbing her arrival. Weird.

"Uncle? Are you okay?"

Hopper blinked at the girl's question, as if surprised by her concern.

"Yes." He snuggled her a little closer. The girl smelled like roses. "Should not you be in bed? It's late and it's been a rough day."

Sophie sniffed, suddenly shy.

"I had a nightmare" she said blushing. "And then I overheard someone shouting." The girl looked directly at Will's mother. She seemed to be a good person. "It was you, was not it?"

The woman did not answer immediately. She stood there, looking at

Sophie as if she were a ghost. Hawkins' people had this strange habit - first they were the boys, the local market people, some people passing by on the street (strange and evil people) and finally Mr. Clark (he had called her from Eleonor).

The young man on Will's mother's side blinked away from his perplexity and gently shook her arm.

"Mom? Mom!" But the woman did not answer.

Sophie shifted uncomfortably. She did not like being the center of attention.

"Do you feel better?" Hopper questioned. He was clearly trying to get the girl's attention away from Joyce Byers. "Does your head still hurt?"

She pondered for a few seconds, her nose wrinkling automatically.

"I'm a little better" she said without much conviction. Sophie stared at the pattern of little flowers that adorned the T-shirt she wore. "My head still hurts a bit, to be honest."

What Sophie did not say was that her head had been sore for days and her nose was bleeding with a frightening frequency. Sometimes she needed to be away from class to hide in the bathroom to clean the little trail of blood that ran down her nose. No one but Max had witnessed this, not even Hopper. She had always had a headache, but they had grown worse since coming to Hawkins.

"You talk!" The woman seemed to have come back to herself, and now she was staring at Sophie in sheer disbelief.

The girl frowned as she cringed against her uncle, frightened and somewhat upset by the woman's statement.

"I should not talk?" Sophie asked uncertainly. He looked uncertainly at his uncle. "Uncle Jim, am I in trouble that I punched that boring kid?" That was a question she wanted to ask, but the headache had prevented her from doing it earlier.

Hopper waved a dismissive glance toward Joyce. Sophie did not see

any of it, she was too busy studying the silent teenager who had begun to laugh. His shoulders trembled, but his laughter was contained, as if he feared his joy would be noticed.

Soph frowned at him, a sense of recognition ... She had certainly seen him on the streets of the city. That was it, sure it was.

"No, you're not." He stroked her arm affectionately. "Joyce? Want to come and talk to her?"

The woman – Joyce – nodded. She threw the bag over the teenager's arms and approached in trembling steps. She ducked down to the same height as Sophie and stood there, looking at her as if she were one of those paintings in museums. Looking away was not an option, so Sophie stayed where she was, looking at the woman with the same curiosity.

"You look so beautiful, my dear." The woman sighed sweetly, and then realized that this sudden compliment could cause some kind of fear or bad impression. "I'm Joyce Byers, and that's my son Jonathan. My eldest son, actually."

Sophie nodded sheepishly at Joyce and Jonathan.

"You're Will's mother" Sophie said, and immediately felt guilty. "I'm sorry you made your son go to the board. I am so sorry."

Joyce nodded, dismissing the girl's apologies as, in the background, Jonathan blinked, looking perplexed. It was too late, he was probably sleepy.

"Do not apologize, sweetheart." Sophie smiled with the affectionate nickname she was directed to. Being called that way made her feel a bit warmer. Suddenly she felt a little more comfortable. "You did what you thought was right."

Joyce stroked Sophie's face and smiled as the girl let out a lazy yawn.

"Time to go back to bed, Soph." Hopper said absently. He was not picky with schedules, but the girl was still very fragile from sudden illness and needed rest. Her well being was more important than anything else. "Jake's going to take you to bed while I talk to Joyce

and her son.”

Sophie wanted to retort, to complain that she could go to sleep alone and that she did not need Jake in escorting her. At bottom, she suspected that her uncle was actually sending Jake to her to make sure she would not hear anything from the conversation that was about to happen. She chose to be quiet, the drowsiness speaking louder than the impertinence within her. Besides, something told her that being unrepentant was not right, that it was not right to disobey an order. Something in her heart said that being disobedient would attract retaliation, such as being locked in a small, dark room. It was a silly feeling since Hopper certainly would not do that to her.

The girl got up, groggy from sleep, and barely noticed when Jake lifted her off the floor and started to take her back to the bedroom. Sleep was talking louder and louder and her limbs looked like gelatin.

"Do you like Hawkins?" Sophie asked suddenly as Jake laid her on the bed.

The man looked at her in exasperation. She did not know if it was the sleep she was feeling that made her see things but there, in the dim light of the lamp, Jake looked old. He had deep circles under his eyes and an air of those who would rather be anywhere but there.

"I prefer Manhattan" he said not very gently. "This town suffocates me."

Sophie, in another moment would simply have been silent, understanding what was happening, and trying to get away from that gross person. But drowsiness hampered the process of reasoning she must have to reach that conclusion, and the utter disinhibition of the aversion she pretended to feel for Jake. If Jake was not so bitter most of the time, he would probably already have a girlfriend.

"Well, I like it here" she said slowly, her dreamy voice. "But I do not feel much ..." she searched for the right word. Sometimes it was so difficult to find the word to define what he was feeling or thinking. There were thousands of words, of definitions, synonyms that sometimes became difficult to find one that fit.

"Welcome?" Jake offered sitting on the edge of the bed.

She nodded solemnly.

"That's right. I feel that ... I do not know, it must be silly of me, but sometimes I feel like I've visited this city before. I have a good and bad feeling about Hawkins. When I'm with my friends, with my uncle and even with you, I feel ... well. But things look really ugly when I'm alone, like, when I'm locked in my room at night. Is weird."

"You're right" Jake said, sounding slightly breathless. "It 's silly."

Sophie closed her eyes, another time she would have spoken up.

"Do you know anything else I do not like about Hawkins?" She sighed. "My mother is not here. I guess this is not going to change anything even if I live in Manhattan or here in Hawkins. In none of these cities I'll have my mother. I miss her, Jake."

Even with her eyes closed, Sophie could feel the change. She felt Jake's stance become a little less light, he felt a sudden sadness hanging in the air the mention of her mother.

Jake cared a lot about her mother, Sophie knew this the way she knew he hated her. If she had to suppose, she would say he was in love with her. The two would even make a nice couple - the smiling blonde and the dark-faced man. He liked Sophie's mother, he loved her, and she'd had that certainty during Susan Eileen's wake when, hugging Jim Hopper, Sophie had seen him cry over her mother's grave. His eyes red and swollen, his face deformed with sadness, his heart-breaking sobs, the blasphemies he had thrown at the grave ... No one had cried as much as he did.

"I miss her too" Jake said, and that was surprising. She did not expect an answer, she just wanted him to know what she was feeling, she wanted him to know she was not alone. "She was an exceptional woman."

Sophie blinked repeatedly, fighting sleep. She did not want to sleep, did not want to dream again with the sergeant-faced boy - she was afraid he would be rude again. But though ... It would not be bad to

dream about him, with those pretty freckles he had on his face. All right if he shouted to her in the dream - the screams were just a way to vent the pain and anger of the moment. He did not totally hate her, Sophie was sure, she could literally feel it.

She closed her eyes if she allowed herself to be carried away by the heat provided by the covers. It was okay to dream about the freckled boy, Sophie could see kindness in himself when he was beyond fury. He was good and she wanted to dream about him, with the small constellation of freckles that stained his face ...

13. Dreaming away from Hawkins' placidness

Summary for the Chapter:

The woman stroked El's face and pulled her into her lap very carefully. Mike studied her carefully, searching for clues. Wavy red hair, delicate facial features, expression and anxious blue eyes. There was nothing to indicate the nature of the woman. But appearance did not define a person's character or intentions. Mike had only seen the outside of her, the image she passed to whoever looked at her. What if she was a bad person?

"Dustin? Lucas? Will? Is anyone listening to me?"

He glanced at his watch, unsure what he was doing with that walkie talkie in his hands. It was early, the sun was barely born, and there was no chance of friends being awake (he would not be awake himself on a normal day). What he was doing was a silly attempt.

He threw the communicator on the bed and returned to sort out the things he had to take to his grandparents' house. He had to have done that last night before bed, but he was not well enough to do it. He was so disturbed by what had happened that he had not even managed to nail his eyes during the night. He lay there, lying on the bed, listening to the agonizing ticking of the clock announce the passage of time until he lost his temper and stood up.

"Mike? Dude?"

He ran to pick up the walkie talkie, not believing someone had listened to him.

"Hey, Lucas." He smiled as if his friend was really there beside him.

He heard a muffled noise on the other side.

"Mike ... Man, it's six in the morning. Has anything happened to justify you calling me this time?"

He tossed things back into his backpack; some jeans, t-shirts, coats and the HQ's that he loved the most.

"I need to talk to you. I'm going to travel with my mother and my sisters and I think I'll come back Monday," I said hastily, running over a few words. "Anyway, I've been talking to my mother and she said we should leave Soph alone for a while."

Lucas grunted like a grumpy old man.

"You called me to talk about Sophie? Is that serious? Dude, you have a crush on her, it has to be that."

He shook his head, stunned by his friend's statement.

"Of course not!" He denied hastily. "I'm just saying she needs some time. Girls are complicated, I live with two girls and I know that better than you."

More consecutive grunts. This time Lucas seemed more receptive to his friend Wheeler's words. Even sleepy he could reason and see clearly that he was right.

Mike glanced at the door out of the corner of his eye. No sign of mother or older sister. He still had time to talk to Lucas, but that did not mean he would extend the conversation much longer. Lucas had to sleep to stay awake during the day and also had the issue of mother and Nancy. They had not yet appeared and this indicated that they would soon.

"What's up?" A snore followed and he rolled his eyes. "Dude, are you still up?"

"A-huh. Yeah, you might be right. Hard to convince Max. She already wanted to go to Sophie's house tonight." Lucas smothered a yawn. "Will that thing with Will stay for later, only when you get back?"

He blinked again and again, drowsy, his eyes burning like he was about to cry. But he was not going to cry, he had no motives, and it would be foolish to cry without a certain normal reason. There was no such thing as crying out of nowhere; There was always a reason: sadness, anger, longing ...

There was always a motive, but not always he could afford to succumb to tears. Some people, like his father, saw no reason for boys to cry. According to Ted Wheeler, only girls cried. It was a retrograde thought that Mike did not share, but that he would not put to the test in front of his father (he did not want it to be called magic).

"It may be," he said closing the backpack. It was ready, now it was just getting in the car and giving Hawkins time. "Pay attention to him, anything is just calling me, do you have the grandparents' house number?"

Anything meant many things. Will, Sophie, El... The focus was on those three.

"Yes, you gave it to me the last time you visited them... Mike ..."

Only by the way in which Lucas had prolonged the notes during his sentence, the slow way his words sounded, how did the words clash, Mike could conclude that it was time to say "good evening" (or would it be good morning?) And let it go to sleep.

"I'll see you Monday, Lucas." He smiled wickedly. "Enjoy the school while I travel to my grandparents' house. You know, I'm seeing this as an early vacation."

He simply could not miss the opportunity to provoke Lucas.

"Fuck you, Wheeler!"

He got the Walkie talkie in his hands even after the only response from him was the static. He looked at the object without being sure what to do with it. The range was small, so I could not use it to communicate with friends. But he still hesitated to leave him behind.

And so, unsure of what motivated him, he slipped the communicator into his backpack and threw it into his back. He wasted no time in looking one last time at the room; He knew things would be the same when he returned.

Everyone was already in the foyer-the mother, the sisters, and ... The father who kissed them.

"There, mother!" He announced as he descended the last steps of the staircase. "I'm going to the car, right?" She quickly quest as she met her father's eyes. He really did not want to talk to Ted, he was not in the mood to endure the pretense of 'happy family'.

No one answered and it was a relief. He was alone in the car for ten minutes and that was the time it took for the drowsiness, the result of a long sleepless night, to catch him. The silence, the chance to go see the grandparents and get away from Hawkins; good things drove him to the dream world.

Or would it be for the nightmarish world? Everything became uncertain as he closed his eyes.

He did not know where he was, that was the only certainty Mike had that exact time, and when that happened all he could do was focus on the details. It was a wide street with an illumination that did not leave much to be desired. If I had to give my opinion, I'd say it was in a middle-class residential area. Middle class type of people almost, a few steps away from having a fortune.

That was definitely not the kind of place he frequented.

An explosion at the top of one of the buildings caught the eye. Fire. He tried to scream, to ask for help, but nothing happened. He could not scream, the words get lost on the way. He also could not move, and with that he remained there, watching the people leave the place while the building was consumed by the fire.

What was the relevance of that? A burning building? Why on earth was he dreaming of something as horrible as that?

The scene changed with a scary bump. It was in an empty street whose light was limited to the light of the moon and the few stars that existed there. Now he knew where he was. He had grown up in Hawkins and knew the city very well to know that he was now the setting for the dream.

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the shape of a person stagger down the street. It was a pretty small person who did not seem to have a very right track. It was only when the person in question was a few steps away that he realized something: The person was a girl and not some girl, he was the girl he had been looking for in the last few months.

He felt his heart turn. Eleven. She was in Hawkins. Or at least she had been, right? That scene was not happening right now, it was impossible.

El. She was ... Destroyed. That was the word to define it. Pallid, face, hands bloody legs. He still wore the clothes with which he had been seen last time. She seemed about to collapse. Was that real or another incongruous dream?

"El!" He called her without being able to contain himself. "Eleven!"

El staggered one last time before stopping. For a moment he believed she had heard him, the hope pumping inside Young Wheeler's heart as she lifted her head and stared in the direction he was. But then she

staggered one last time and fell to the side.

"ELEVEN!"

He ran, his heart hammering firmly against her chest. She was not dead, she could not be dead. It was too cruel to be dreaming of her death. The universe always conspired against him, but that went beyond all bounds.

El was not dead, but she was not far from it. He whimpered to himself as he reached for her arm to wake her and nothing happened. He could not touch her. He could speak, but he could not be heard; he could walk, but he could not touch her to help her - the limits of the dream were becoming clear.

He stood beside her, trying to make her listen to him. He stood still, his breathing increasingly irregular. Was she dying? Please, she was not dying.

He did not look away from El even when the sound of a car braking abruptly cut through the night.

"Oh my God!" A woman's desperate voice echoed down the empty street. "Baby ... Who did this to you, Baby? Who did this cruelty to you?"

The woman came up and crouched beside El. She wore high-heeled boots, the kind of shoes a Hawkins woman would not wear.

"Help her." Mike asked without looking at the woman. El was the priority. "Help her."

The woman stroked El's face and pulled her into her lap very carefully. Mike studied her carefully, searching for clues. Wavy red hair, delicate facial features, expression and anxious blue eyes. There was nothing to indicate the nature of the woman. But appearance did not define a person's character or intentions. Mike had only seen the outside of her, the image she passed to whoever looked at her. What

if she was a bad person?

"You're still alive, little one." She spoke in a shaky voice. "You'll be fine, you'll be fine ... I'll take care of you personally so you'll be fine."

"What are you going to do with her ?!" Mike questioned loudly as the woman stood up, taking El on her lap. No matter that she could not hear him, he had to try. "Where are you taking her? Are you going to hurt her? Please do not hurt her ..."

She was taking El, the woman with red curls and white clothes was walking with El in her arms as if she were a rag doll and was leading her to an uncertain destination. What if that woman was a bad person? What if her purpose was to do something wrong with Him? No, she could not ...

Mike woke up stunned, not knowing what to think or feel after a dream like that. The dream woman had taken El somewhere, had taken El to an uncertain destination. But it was just another dream, was not it? Mike had many strange dreams and none of them were real. Dreams were dreams, nothing more. Eleven was not with that woman. Or was it?

It moved in search of a more comfortable position and this attracted the attention of the other occupants of the vehicle. The mother looked away from the road for a brief moment and offered him a tender smile. Nancy did not do the same, she looked unhappy as ever as she forced a smile on Holly.

Ten more minutes and they were already parking in front of Mike's grandparents' house. It was a large house, painted in shades of green and white that gave only a cozy and at the same time aristocratic air. The front and back garden was full of beautiful flowers and plants. That place was fantastic.

He smiled to see the couple of old men waiting for them outside the house.

"Grandma Jenna!" Mike exclaimed, taking off his seat belt and opening the car door.

"Michael Wheeler, do not even think about ..."

Too late, Mother, she thought as she jumped out of the car and ran to hug her grandparents.

"Mike." The grandmother, a white-haired lady always well-groomed and gifted with a sympathetic voice, hugged him tightly. "Look how you've grown, my boy, and it's so beautiful." She grinned as she assessed the grandchild from head to toe. "Isn't he handsome, Ethan?"

Mike's grandfather nodded in agreement, his dark eyes gleaming. He was a tall man with a wrinkled face and wide smile. He had fought during World War II, but the horror of the war had not taken away the joy of his life; On the contrary, fighting in the war had made him notice that life was too short to be whining.

Mike's grandfather nodded in agreement, his dark eyes gleaming. He was a tall man with a wrinkled face and wide smile. He had fought during World War II, but the horror of the war had not taken away the joy of his life; On the contrary: fighting in the war had made him notice that life was too short to be whining.

"My God, boy, did you really grow up! What did your mother give you to eat?" Laughed at the review itself. "Be careful not to grow too big, Mike." He leaned forward a little, and in a conspiratorial tone, he whispered to the dark man. "What if your girlfriend is short? She can not reach you, boy."

He blushed angrily, wincing at the malicious remark.

"I do not have a girlfriend, Grandpa."

"I do not know if I believe you, but I'll let it go." He smiled as Holly and Nancy ran to hug him. "But just for now. We'll talk about this

later, be safe."

He shook his head at that knowing it was true. His grandmother did not let things go unnoticed.

There was something wrong with Nancy, that was right. She seemed distant, her blue eyes seemed lost in a distant world and her absence of spirit was evidenced by her sporadic and unenthusiastic comments. Had she had a fight with Steve or Jonathan? The three of them had been very stuck since Barb's death.

He spent the morning trying to attract her attention (he wanted to talk to her, see what was bothering her), but he only got that done in the early afternoon, just after lunch. Nancy was distracting Holly in their room while the adults chatted in the kitchen. This was the perfect opportunity (not so perfect, but she could afford it) to talk to her, and perhaps, depending on the mood and extent of her problems, comment on what was going on with Will and Sophie.

"What do you want, Mike? Any problems?" Nancy questioned without looking up at him.

Holly ignored the two brothers with delight, too delighted with the porcelain dolls that her grandmother had given her to pay attention to what was happening.

"Talk to you, maybe?" He walked to the window and looked out at the street. "Are you okay? Did you fight Steve or something? Did he hurt you?"

Nancy laughed without much humor.

"Steve just did not do much. He just rumbles when he's around Billy, other than that." She straightened her hair. Mike was not yet accustomed to Nancy's hair that size. "Please do not be a jerk to your

girlfriend when you get one."

Holly laughed absently.

"Mike already has a girlfriend, Sophie, she's so beautiful."

Why were people with this obsession about Mike having a girlfriend or not? Frankly, that was stupid.

"She's not my girlfriend." Mike closed his eyes for a moment, exasperated. "Not that she's not beautiful, not that it's up to her."

He had not gone there to curl up talking about Sophie or about any girl.

Nancy managed to laugh at her brother's embarrassment.

"The girl who went to the board with you." She said thoughtfully. "You do not want to talk about her, do you?"

"I really want to, I want to talk about her and about Will.

"What about Eleven? Do you want to talk about her, about the dreams she's having with her?"

He froze in place, startled by Nancy's questioning. El ... How did she know about the dreams he had been having? Argh! No matter how she had discovered about dreams, what was done was done and there was no use denying it.

"Maybe then, but right now I'm focused on Will, he's weird."

"You, too, have been strangers. You and your friends are strangers, that's the truth."

He nodded in exasperation.

"I'm not as weird as him." He frowned as he looked out at the street. "Nancy, come here and see something."

"Mike, are you still implicating Grandma's neighbor? Okay, as strange as that is, it does not make him an alien."

His grandmother's neighbor was really strange. He had a very large nose and his skin was strangely greenish. That for a nerd boy of nine, ten years was a prerequisite for being an alien in disguise.

"No, that's not it. Come here, seriously!"

Rolling her eyes at the younger brother's impatience, Nancy came over to see what made him so agitated.

Brother and sister leaned over the window to watch the mother rush across the yard. It did not even seem like she was wearing high heels, such was the skill she had in wearing those shoes.

Nancy looked at Mike, her pale eyes glittering with curiosity.

"Where's Mommy going?"

Mike shrugged, a small smile rising on his lips.

"Do not know." He looked at Nancy suggestively, "But we'll find out."

"Mike, we will not follow the ma ..."

She ignored her older sister's protests and turned to Holly. The blonde still focused on the porcelain dolls.

"Holl's, I need your help." Mike smiled at his younger sister. "Nancy and I are going to leave, and we need you to distract Grandma and Grandpa, can that be? You're going to be like a spy."

Holly giggled with excitement.

"I'm going to be a spy." He saluted. "Spy Holly!" He turned away from the two brothers. "Grandma, Grandpa, I have to talk to you"

Mike laughed, grabbing Nancy's hand and tugging it behind him. She had said she wanted to get close to him and what better way to get closer to her younger brother than to spy on her mother and find out every step of it?

14. The Insanity of Becky Ives' Big Sister

Mike rolled his eyes when Nancy grunted for the tenth time in a row. Where was her adventurous spirit? Curiosity? Why, frankly, he was curious.

How could I not be curious about that? They should have traveled Friday afternoon and this trip had been anticipated - far too early (not that he had anything against it). His mother had a purpose other than to visit her parents and he wanted to find out what it was. No one could blame him for wanting to know the truth behind it all.

"Shut up, Nancy," he hissed hastily, worried that her sister's claims would ruin everything. "Shut up or Mom will listen to us."

Nancy stared at him, outraged at the order her younger brother directed her.

"Excuse me, did you really tell me to shut up? Look, Mike, I did not even want to be here; I'm only here because you dragged me. So do not you dare tell me to shut up again or I'll leave and leave you here alone. "

He turned his gaze back to his mother knowing that it was a waste of time to reply to any answer-Nancy would always have a complaint on the tip of her tongue. Karen was walking down the street quickly, each step of it being given with determination as if she had a certain destination in mind.

Thank heavens she did not look back because if she had she would have seen a pair of tall teenagers (one reluctant blond girl and one freckled freckled boy ignoring the other) who seemed highly displaced and could not even hide.

They followed her mother for a few more blocks until she finally reached the destination she had in mind. A faded house with a poorly

tended garden. They were careful to stop a few yards from the house so that the mother would not see them.

Nancy frowned as if she smelled a nasty smell.

"This place .. What mom doing here?"

He looked at the place. It was a simple house, ten times smaller than his house and five times smaller than his grandparents' house. The place was a little distant from the center of town which meant that his mother had not been there by accident.

"I thought you did not want to be here, you were not curious." He commented venomously and cringed at the icy glare he received. "Okay, so ... We'll see what she came to do here."

They approached the place and Nancy, to Mike's horror, went directly to the front door as if to ring the bell or knock on the door. He pulled her arm around for attention and pointed to the side of the house. Open windows, completely unprotected - a full plate for two eavesdroppers like them.

"... I do not know what else to do, Karen." A woman moaned loudly enough for the two to hear. "She's getting worse and worse. She does not react anymore and for her to eat ... Christ, it's a daily struggle to make her eat something."

He craned his neck to look inside the house. He did not find his mother, but a blond woman stared at him. With a very well said "shit", he recoiled waiting for the cry that would denounce his presence.

"There's a woman right there," he whispered to Nancy's questioning face. "I think she saw me."

Nancy gaped at the prospect of being caught like a voyeur.

Neither of them managed to move to escape the scene of the crime, they remained there, immobilized by the panic. They just kept waiting for the worst. The worst did not come. Nothing at all happened.

"She's dying, Karen, she's dying for a child that does not even exist." The woman's voice came up again. Only this time Mike noticed that her voice sounded too distant to be coming from the room. "They killed my sister, she's breathing but she's dead."

"Please do not talk about her like that, Becky." Mike's mother asked sounding hurt.

Mike risked a new look. The woman was still there, still sitting and still looking at him. To be frank, it seemed she was looking through him. The woman's dark eyes had no focus, they were lost in a place beyond that where she was.

He nudged Nancy for her to follow his example and give a peek into the room. It was a child's room, more specifically, a girl's room. Mike was not a fool, and he knew how to recognize a girl's room. It had dolls and plush bears, the walls were painted a yellow that had once been solar but now faded. There was also a small white crib with a mobile of clowns floating above him, but there was no baby sleeping there or a sign that he had at least been used one day.

The only person in the room was the light-haired woman. Maybe the child was in another room or had not even been born yet. Holly's room was ready before she was even born. Maybe that was it. Did Nancy agree with his assumptions? Judging by her expression, she knew that she did not even have an opinion about the subject. Nancy liked to evaluate things before she positioned herself - it was an interesting and sometimes admired posture for him.

He reached down and pulled Nancy to do the same thing to hear the undisputed sound of a door opening. Someone was entering the room.

"Hi, Terry." Nancy caught her breath at the sound of Karen's voice. Please do not ruin everything, Mike pleaded mentally. "How are you?"

No answer. Nothing but an exasperated sigh that certainly did not come from the mother of the two Wheelers.

"She will not answer, Karen. She does not answer anyone five years

ago."

Mike raised an eyebrow at the statement. Five years without a word? That was a long time.

"Be patient with her, Becky. She's not to blame for anything."

She peeked just in time to see the woman, Becky, snort. She was standing next to Mike's mother, clearly avoiding looking at her sister. It was as if she felt disgusted ...

Mike suppressed the urge to curse when Nancy surprised him with a delicate tug. He waited far enough to challenge her about what she was doing, but then he restrained himself from her facial and body expression. Nancy looked furious, and Mike knew that questioning her when she did was not wise.

"So that's the way it is, that's how you get in trouble!" She raged as they were already a good distance from the two women's house.

They stopped the shadow of a tree. Mike looked at her with concern. As much as he insisted on the contrary, Mike cared for his sister's opinion - he had always cared for himself and this importance has been accentuated even more since the death of Nancy's friend.

"You're angry?"

All Nancy's exasperation seemed to fade as she let out a long weary sigh.

"No, Mike, I'm not angry. Really." She stated tucking her hair into a messy bun that did not match her. She was Nancy, his sister, the perfect daughter whose only slip was to fall in love with her parents. "Look, I'm just tired, okay? I thought I'd come here to rest, get away from the problems and get myself into more trouble."

The dark circles around her blue eyes confirmed that. Apparently he was not the only one not to be having completely quiet nights sleep.

"Sorry for dragging you into this problem?" Mike scratched the back of his neck, clumsy. "Look the good side, at least Mum did not get us. That's good, is not it?"

Nancy stared at him for a moment before giggling. It confused him. Was she sad or happy? Girls were so complicated.

"Oh my God, Mike, this is so silly!" Nancy exclaimed and pulled him into a tight hug.

The hug took time and it caught Mike's attention. Lately she had been hugging him too often, and that meant that she was not well either. Neither was well.

"You want to talk now?" Nancy offered to pull Mike's black wires off his pale forehead. "About what you wanted to tell me before ... All that."

He wanted to talk to her about what was bothering her, wanted to help her, but also wanted to collapse about Will and Sophie. It was highly selfish of him, but he just could not take it anymore. She needed to vent to someone that it was beyond the level of unbearable. If he kept that to himself for a little while longer he would probably be driven to madness.

He walked away from his older sister gently and told her. He told her about everything that had afflicted him in the last week. He told about Will, and even Sophie did mention El briefly. He could talk to Nancy about everything except about El and he knew she understood him since she could not talk about Barb either.

Nancy did not say anything for a while, just stood there, her lips twitching as she always did when she thought of something really difficult.

"Do you think this girl could have any kinship with Eleven?" Nancy questioned sideways from a hole in the sidewalk. They had agreed that it would be better to talk while they walked; it would be less likely that Karen caught them. "A twin sister or something?"

He shrugged.

You know, so you're not scared like me and the guys scare us when we see you. "

The blonde nodded understandingly.

"Look, I want you to know something too, okay?" She reached into the pocket of her faded, shabby jeans. "I ... Hmm ... kind of got accepted into NYU."

Mike smiled proudly.

"Cool! You will, right? Mr. Clark said there is too much, that the possibilities for those who study there are immense and that the science lab is wonderful. "

Nancy did not answer. She did not look as thrilled as he.

"We can talk about this later? It's just ..."

He nodded hastily. He, more than anyone else lately, knew how inconvenient it was to have someone trying to force his thoughts out. Sometimes people did not really care about how you feel, but how you behave around them. If Mike was sad, but with a smile on his face it would not bother anyone, but if it were to happen

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The fact is that they both knew that Holly could not get her grandparents to be around for long, and they would soon realize that two of her three grandchildren were away from home, so they tried to put together a plan that would take the focus off their escape. Mike thought the plan was perfect, and Nancy was not as confident as he was.

The last time they had been there the two older Wheelers were like cat and mouse, rarely were the two of them in the same room without a fight between them. And knowing that the grandparents were not aware of the way they were now, Mike wanted to take advantage of that fact. Somehow he felt guilty for lying to his grandparents, but on the other hand, he definitely did not want to get scolded for running away from home and going to spy on his mother.

Nancy bit her bottom lip, uncertain about what they were about to

do.

"Mike," she called out, her hand outstretched on the door handle.

"It's no big deal, Nancy. You're just going to yell at me, swear at me and blame me for being an idiot." He laughed with false disdain, the quarrels the two of them used to have still lived in his mind. It was hard to forget the first time your older sister cursed you or she pushed you out of her bedroom because you were too busy with your own life.

"That's nothing new and it would not be the first time." Mike looked at her defiantly, "Are you scared? Is Nancy Wheeler afraid? There is! I knew you were afraid. "

Call Nancy fearful was always a good way to make her move on and the brightness of outrage in her blue eyes, Mike could be sure that this tactic still worked perfectly.

Nancy opened the door with a wicked grin on her lips and, without Mike being prepared, pushed him away. It was not a big push (Troy had done worse), but it was enough to make him stagger back.

"I HATE YOU, MICHAEL! HOW CAN YOU BE SO IDIOT ?!"

She ran into the house to accompany her older sister. Okay, everything was on the right track.

"WHAT ?! NO! THE IDIOT HERE IT'S YOU DRAGGING FOR THOSE THINGS! NEVER CALL ME TO SEE YOU KISSING THAT ASSHOLE. "

"HE IS NOT AN ASSHOLE, YOU ARE!"

Attracted by the screaming, Mike's grandparents emerged from the kitchen. Holly immediately ran to the two older brothers, frightened by their behavior. She had grown accustomed to the civility that had settled between the two of them in recent months, and seeing them so altered made her weird.

Damn it! Mike had not really thought about how their fights would affect Holly. After a brief moment he was tempted to stop with the theater they were playing. But he could not do that. They had already

begun and would have to end it.

Nancy also seemed to be suffering the same impasse, her blue eyes begging for them to stop. She, too, did not seem to be amused by her cursing at her brother. He seemed to suffer from it.

Mike shook his head at Nancy, determined not to back down. Sorry, Holl's.

"Do not call Mike a fool," Holly defended, grabbing the brunette's legs. "He's not an idiot."

"That's right, young lady, do not call your idiot brother." The grandmother, her face wrinkled with concern, scolded. "What's going on with you two? First you go out and then reappear fighting like a cat and a mouse."

Mike caught Holly in his lap as he looked meaningfully at Nancy. Fighting with Nancy was easier than he expected. Well, at least that was his opinion.

"She went to find her stupid boyfriend and dragged me along to see them both." Mike made a face of disgust with the fake memory and immediately remembered the real time he had found Nancy kissing a guy. The disgust if Mike became true. "Argh, it was so disgusting, Grandma, they were kissing, they were almost swallowing."

"That's an X-9! Then you do not know why girls at school do not like you! No one likes an X-9."

"I'm not being an X-9, I'm just telling the disgrace I had to witness."

Nancy hesitated for a moment, the expression slightly amused after hearing the last sentence of the brunette. She had to admit, her little brother had a knack for the dramatic side of things.

"DISGRACE? I AM ONLY KISSING MY BOYFRIEND! DO NOT SPEAK AS IF YOU HAVE NEVER BEEN KISSED A GIRL BEFORE, MICHAEL! DO YOU THINK I DID NOT HEAR YOU TALKING ABOUT YOUR FRIENDS ABOUT ... SOPHIE? "

Nancy's blue eyes sought his. She feared she had crossed the fine line

that separated the drama they both interpreted from the reality that could hurt Mike. He would never admit it on his own, but it was obvious that he had feelings for Sophie, whether she was Eleven or not.

Mike stuck his tongue out at her, now bent on cherishing Holly.

Holly hid her face on his brother's shoulder, hating it all. Mike's grandmother sighed, exchanging glances with her husband.

"Nancy, my dear, let's talk about your behavior, right? And you, young man." She looked at Mike. "Calm down your little sister and talk to your grandfather."

By then Mike had felt somewhat guilty and calculating. It was coming off as expected. It was now with Nancy, she had to ask her grandmother not to tell her mother either that she did not tell him that she had run off to meet her boyfriend.

Mike comforted Holly for a few moments, aware that his grandfather was watching him closely. He was wary of something.

"Mike, do you want to talk about what happened?"

He denied it, still busy with Holly. He murmured to her that it was okay, that it had all been a joke of him and Nancy.

"It was nothing, Grandpa." He looked for you to find him smiling. "Some problem?"

He waved negative.

"Your grandmother was right. You really grew up, boy. Now you can even hold your sister in your lap." He laughed as he sat on the couch. "Now, be honest with your old grandfather, is there any girl in sight?"

Mike looked away from his grandfather. His grandfather looked at him with genuine curiosity.

He thought of El. Her timid smile, her brown eyes gleaming with timid joy, her honey-colored hair. Thinking of him in that way, with those same features, made her very much like Sophie. It was as if

their image was merging.

"She's gone, Grandpa." Mike kept his mind fixed on El, his mind turning to Sophie. "I think she went ... Are you going to ask if I'm gay?"

Mike's grandfather arched an eyebrow at him.

"No, I'm not going. Has anyone ever asked you that? "

"Your father is an idiot, you know that, do not you, child?" You said so quickly that you surprised Mike. There was a hardness in his voice that even frightened him.

Mike knew there were problems between his grandfather and his father, but he had never stopped to think how deep those problems were or why they exist. No father-in-law liked his brother-in-law, Mike knew this tradition of adults perfectly well, but that was not just what happened between the two father figures he had in his life.

There was a deep wound between Ted and Ethan, a sore no longer young but showing no signs of healing. For a moment Mike wondered if his grandfather knew everything Ted Wheeler did to Karen. Of course he does not know, Mike answered his own thought. If Ethan knew about the things that happened at the Wheeler's house, Ted certainly would not be alive any more. Mike's grandfather was a person's love, but even he had his limits.

"Okay, so your friends called you. They asked you to call back. It was something involving a girl named Sophie. " The grandfather smiled sideways. "Surely she is not the girl who left, is she? Anyway, your friends asked you to call Luke's house? Lucian? Lucas ... Yes, it was Lucas. "

Mike ignored his grandfather's suggestive mention of Soph, focused on Lucas's call. He was there less than a day there and Lucas was already calling him. That could only mean that something had happened to Will or Sophie. Deep down, not so deep down, he wished this thing had a direct relationship with El. He wanted the news to be about her.

And to his surprise, the news really had a connection with her.

15. The girl who survived the hell is in Hawkins

He dialed the Sinclair house number without hesitating or stopping to think that, in the midst of that rapidity, he might have missed a digit. No, this possibility did not exist. He'd known Lucas since he'd understood each other and had always known his house number—they'd been countless nights arguing over whether Barry Allen was more agile than Mercury.

Maybe it was a hint of the universe, maybe he was being pious enough to alert him, but the fact that Lucas answered the phone immediately meant he was ringing on the phone, waiting for Mike to call back. That was a bad sign.

"Shut up and listen to me." Lucas's voice demanded. "Just listen to me!"

Mike clenched his fists, not quite sure how to react. It was common to have the other shut up, very common, especially for Lucas who was extremely authoritarian. But that, it surpassed any kind of authoritarianism known. Lucas had not even let Mike say "oh, man, what's going on?" This was outrageous.

"Seriously? Did you ask me to call you and tell me to shut up ?! Are you crazy, Sinclair?" Mike shouted at the phone, completely unhappy.

Lucas sighed from the other end of the line. Mike could picture him in his house, sitting impatiently on the couch.

"I'm sorry, all right? We've figured something out and we're not really sure how to deal with it, it's all crazy, you're not going to believe it, it's going to make your head explode, man."

"Can you stop the mystery? I have to take care of my sister ..."

There was a moment of agitation, as if Lucas were fighting with someone really annoying.

"It's about Eleven, okay?" Dustin's voice took over Lucas's. He

sounded as breathless as on the day they had both fled from Troy and James. He looked excited and at the same time scared. "Just listen to everything and please do not be stupid to the point of denying reality."

Mike felt his stomach flutter with Dustin's words. Stupid to the point of being in denial. It was about El that they were talking and the grave tone they were using indicated that nothing good was yet to come.

Oh God! She was dead, it could only be that. He fell on the couch in the living room, his eyes burning for a reason he really wished he did not exist.

"You can talk." Mike said in a trembling voice. He would not hide the fear he was feeling. It would be stupid if he was not showing fear.

It took a few seconds for Dustin's voice to come up again. Mike was not the only one to be afraid at the time, but then there was a question: what was Dustin afraid of? Of his reaction? Yeah, Mike could agree that he did not have the best reactions in times of stress.

Mike closed his eyes during the small recess of words, visualizing Eleven. The image he had of her was specific; that of the night that Will Byers's false body was rescued. Mike had screamed without really caring about her. Tonight all that mattered was his pain, the pain of losing his best friend. But that was not the last time she screamed at her, before it had been since she would not be feeling so much remorse.

How could he have been such an idiot with him so often? Argh! That week she had only helped them and how many times had he treated her like crap? She did not deserve anything of that and he, not only him ... Lucas had seen El as a danger sign, Dustin had not treated her badly, but for him she was nothing more than a girl with super powers and Mike ... He had been the worst of all idiots. The three had only realized how good, how innocent and selfless she was after she sacrificed herself to save them. Noticing the value of someone after this someone is gone is so typical and so mediocre.

"I cannot stop running, this is how everything always starts and I always

have to repeat to myself that it's all a silly dream, which is not real. Running gives me a feeling of being away from danger. I think that's the feeling of freedom. "

He wrinkled his nose. Even confused did not interrupt whatever Dustin was reading, he had promised he would not interrupt.

"I just stop running when a light comes out of nowhere and blinds me completely. It's them, they're here to get me. I cannot stop crying. The fear I feel grows bigger with each passing second and keeps increasing even when the glare decreases.

Three boys are around me, they are noisy and this is scary. It is not theirs that I am running away from, but who assures me that they are not as bad as those who persecute me? I feel their fear, they're just as scared as I am, but that does not make any difference. What if they hurt me? What if they turn me over to the bad people I'm running away from?

One of the three boys realizes this. He is skinny, he is soaked, he is much taller than me, he has black hair bigger than mine, dark eyes, pale skin and face dotted with brown little dicks that look like stars. "

There is a brief pause in the narrative.

"Does this sound familiar to you, Mike? Does this boy look like someone you know?"

Worst of all, it looked like someone he knew. Those were the physical characteristics of himself. How many times had he looked in the mirror and hated the freckles on his face? Had he found himself pathetic?

"He tries to reassure me, asks what is my name, where I come from ... I want to say that my name is Sophie, I'm lost, but it's not the answer that comes up in my mind. A number comes up in my head, It's a strange place, like a laboratory. He's kind to me and offers me his coat when I do not answer anything at all.

Such gentleness and so much noise-the sound of thunder, raindrops, subtle remarks-makes me suspicious. Mistrust disappears when I accept the coat. For a moment I feel protected from whatever is chasing me. "

Mike opens his eyes again. What Dustin had just read was the narration of all that had happened the night they searched for Will only in his perspective.

Mike would never forget the night he met her, the way her big brown eyes were filled with terror, how she'd dodged him when she'd offered the coat ... El's thoughts about them ... Where Dustin had unearthed those words? Had he created everything? Whatever the answer, it was too cruel.

He pressed the phone to your ear with all the strength he had. It would probably leave marks on his pale face, but it was not like he cared about it, not everything he'd just heard.

"What the fuck, Dustin?" Mike raged, not caring if anyone would listen. "What the fuck was that you just read?"

Dustin murmured something about someone's diary, but that did not help because Mike was no longer paying attention to him. The mind was completely occupied by unpleasant thoughts that he could not even organize.

"Mike, are you still there?"

He looked at the living room door. No sign of anyone to see how he was. Of course they had listened to him (who had not heard him cursing?), But they were respecting his space. Mike could not be more grateful for this momentary privacy they were giving him.

"You can talk, I'm listening to you."

The lack of emotion in Mike's voice worried Dustin.

"Are you okay?"

"No, I'm not fine." He answered abruptly. It was the first time he'd admitted it aloud. The truth. "You can talk what you have to say." He repeated emphatically.

It took Dustin a few seconds to speak again, and when he did, he did not sound more like himself. In fact, it was not Dustin who talked to him but rather Will who had taken over his friend's place.

"Sorry, man." That was the first thing Will said. "Look, in the middle of that mess with Troy, Sophie ended up forgetting her diary at school. I found and even tried to give it back to her, but no one received me at her house. The fact is that I did not know it was a diary, Mike, I thought it was a book. I just opened it to read and found it."

Mike buried his face in his only free hand.

"I found a lot more than that. Mike, she talks about all of us unconsciously, talks about ... about demogorgon and about the inverted world, but like it's not just a crazy dream." Will cleared his throat. "She does not cite our names, but it's not very difficult to know who is who in the narratives, the girl is frighteningly detailed."

Surely he knew where they wanted to go.

"She talks about absolutely everything, does not let anything escape. You who know what that means, do not you know?" There was an appeal in Will's voice. "She and Eleven are the same person, Mike, there's no way to deny it, how can she know all this without being Eleven herself?"

"But ... how? She was in Manhattan, Will, Sophie was born and raised in Manhattan. She has a life luggage." Mike argued.

Anything to deny the reality that was thrown in his face, that was Mike's goal at the time. He could not accept it so easily. No, he had to contend, to look for flaws in that situation.

"I know, it was the first thing I thought of. But I kept reading, Mike, and I found something plausible." Will retorted fervently. "Here she says that she, about eight months ago, woke up in a hospital completely out of memory. Think, man. With Eleven out of memory, she could be ..."

"Manipulated. They could tell her anything she would believe in. "Mike added in a shaky voice," They could build a fake life for her without any problem. "

He felt the truth hit him like a punch in the face. In the end Dustin

was right, everyone was right and he was wrong. El and Sophie were the same person, the same person with a past obscured by lack of memory.

The girl they all knew as Jim Hopper's niece was, in fact, El. They had manipulated her into believing her to be who she was. *Oh, El, what have they done to you? What do these people want to keep you from everything and everyone?*

"She adores you, just so you know as a curiosity. She practically worships you, man." Will commented, and there was an unmistakable note of pride in his teenage voice. "It's hard for you not to be mentioned on a page of this diary: be it quoting your name, now that you've met, or remembering you in a dream."

Mike moved on the couch, uneasy and definitely uncomfortable. It was extremely embarrassing to hear Will talk about his reading of El / Sophie's diary.

The naturality that painted Will's voice made it seem as though he had read some book, unimportant, and not as personal an object as the diary in which El had written his dreams. Mike was not sure he could do the same. Judging by the way he felt at that very moment, he certainly would not act as Will had been acting.

"Keep her diary." He instructed. "When I come back, we'll see what we do ...

Will started to say and was interrupted by something. For a moment Mike thought someone had taken the phone from the younger Byers, but this conjecture lasted for a short time. He heard something resembling a strangled animal, and then in a row, voices exclaiming in a panic. Several times Dustin's voice made itself heard and he looked horrified as he shouted "WHAT THE HELL IS THAT ?!"

He waited for someone to tell him what was happening, but nothing but the noise was heard and Mike was left to figure out what was going on. Will was having a new cough, and this time it was worse than the last.

"What's happening? Guys ?! Somebody tell me what's going on!"

No answer. Mike stood there, calling his friends for another five minutes and listening to his screams and swearing until the line was mute. He dialed number one, two, three times in a row, but absolutely nothing has changed. Nobody answered.

Heart pounding against his chest in a frenzy of feelings, he put the phone on the hook, and before anyone came up to ask if everything was okay (even his grandparents had limits on the privacy thing), he decided it was best to leave to relax.

The backyard had always been Mike's favorite spot - when he was small he imagined the place to be an enchanted garden full of elves hiding in the bushes and now it was where he could go to try to figure out everything that was going on .

There so far from Hawkins, Mike could see things in a new light. Or at least that's what he thought would happen.

El and Sophie were really the same person.

It was as Dustin had said: it would be idiotic to deny reality. In fact, in the last few days he had been a complete idiot. The truth had literally been played in his face. The same brown eyes, the same delicate features, the same kindness and courage to defend the people he liked. Everything indicated that they were the same person, but he, a first-timer, had refused to see the obvious, let pain and fear irrevocably dominate him.

But then ... What had happened to him in the last few months? What had made her become Sophie? Sophie had a life, she had a mother, a father, an uncle, she had no friends, but she had explained the reason ... There were so many unanswered questions that Mike's head hurt.

"Mike?"

He forced a smile on Holly. The girl had approached so quietly that if she had not, Mike would have noticed her.

"I called you four times, Mike." Holly complained tearfully as she approached her older brother. She had a trembling lower lip, a clue that she was on the verge of tears. "Are you mad at me?" I heard you

screaming in the living room and Nancy said I should be quiet. "

Mike looked at Holly considering he had not been spoiling her too much in the last few months. He dismissed the possibility almost immediately. No, he was not spoiling Holly. He was just doing what Nancy had not done for him.

"I'm sorry, Holls, I did not want to ignore you. I was just thinking about ... Forget it, it's nothing important."

Holly sat down next to her brother.

"If you were thinking, it's because it's important. What's so important?"

He imagined El's brown eyes, his restrained, sparkling smile and the one she always sketched now that it was Sophie Eileen; both equally beautiful. How had he not noticed? How could he have been so blind and not realize something so obvious?

"I'm an idiot, Holly." He counted hugging the blonde. "It was a fantastic thing that I wanted very much."

"What's the problem? Is not that good?"

He squeezed Holly as if the girl were a giant teddy bear. The girl still smelled like a baby, and as pathetic as that might sound if spoken aloud, that scent soothed him.

"It's very good. Definitely good, but ..."

Holly moved to show how impatient she felt.

"Argh, Mike, you're picking up on adult mania." The girl grunted not very gently. "Stop putting that 'but'. A good thing happened, you should be happy."

"That's why I'm an idiot, Holls."

"Then stop being an idiot and start taking advantage. It's ..."

Mike sighed.

"It's simple." He finished with a giggle. "I know that and I'll try to see it all this way." He hesitated for a moment, in the last few months he had avoided as much as he could in the tongue, but now he did not have to do it any longer. "I promise, Holls."

For a four-year-old, Holly was surprisingly intelligent. She was right, why complicate things, putting a stop to something that should make him happy.

For months he had been wanting to know about El (whether it was his whereabouts or she was well) and now she was so close to him; now he knew she was fine and could not take advantage of it. Okay, it was time to forget the questions you had in mind (no matter how pertinent they were) and focus on the good side of things.

El was fine, he was alive and that was all that mattered. Eleven was fine, she had found a way to turn around, to survive once more the adversities that life had imposed on her. How can one not be enchanted by such a thing?

Mike smiled as he pressed Holly against him, his chest bubbling with pride. Eleven was alive. She was only twelve, now thirteen, and had survived hell.

But nothing was so simple and, beneath the joy that flooded him little by little, Mike knew that the problems were only beginning and that this time they would be more complicated than the ones they had faced in 1983. The time when everything was so simple as Holly believed it to be, had already passed, and no matter how good things might come to rejoice life, problems would also arise.

Nothing is completely one hundred percent, not even happiness, and to know that there were some pertinent questions that insisted on lingering in Mike Wheeler's mind. There were two particular issues that plagued him in the following days: what was going on with Will and what would they do from that point forward?

16. Leave in peace (by the hour) the girl who came back from hell

Mike stared at the basement ceiling without actually seeing him, his mind so full he could barely hear the comments that Will, Lucas, and Dustin made about El's diary. He could barely organize his own thoughts.

He unconsciously clutched the small notebook he had adopted for himself in a vague attempt to situate himself, to understand everything that was happening. It was easier to reason when he had all the facts, literally, set before him.

Unfortunately this tactic did not work very well. The problem is that things have not gotten easier. The facts were there, arranged before him and nothing happened, nothing came up other than the old doubt. Something did not fit and did not allow him to go ahead with the line of reasoning.

Mike wanted to scream in anger, but he knew doing that would not help much. The universe was mocking him once more. El was back (now there was no doubt about that), but why did not she act more like herself? What was wrong, what had they done to her?

What was he letting go? Yes, why he certainly was not seeing something. *Dreams!* Thought Jubilantly. *The dreams he was having with him certainly meant something.*

All right, Mike, it's time to think. It's not hard, you can do it. What was the first dream, how was it? The first dream had been simple and at the same time chaotic. El was in the strange forest, she ran and Mike could see nothing but his feet hurried.

The second dream had been almost a month after the first, out of it that El had said his first words-things completely disconnected. "Everything dark," was what she said before she burst into tears and ran off again.

The third...

"What do you think, Mike? Mike? Mike! Mike, man, I cannot believe we've been talking here for hours and you're simply ignoring us.

Extremely reluctantly, Mike looked ceiling look and directed the three boys around him. Lucas seemed particularly outraged.

"Sorry, dude. Can you repeat it? Seriously, this time I swear I'll pay attention. "

Lucas was silent, the kind of silence that made it clear that he had accepted his friend's apologies but that if he continued to daydream and ignoring everything they were talking about, he would hit a book in his head. This had already happened once in the second grade and Mike definitely was not willing to repeat the experience.

"Anyway." Dustin stood up flipping through his battered-looking notepad. "Basically what we found out was that she woke up in a hospital, completely out of memory and with a woman claiming to be her mother."

Susan Eileen, Mike mentally completed. The woman who had fooled El into thinking she was a person she was not.

"Such a Susan does not seem to be a bad person." Will said flatly on the floor. He had El's diary in his hands and flicked his brows. "I mean, the way Sop ... Eleven talks about her does not make me think of her as a bad person. Actually, she looks like my mother, protective and at the same time cool."

Dustin continued as if Will's comment had not existed, as if they had not interrupted him.

"They lived together in Manhattan, in Soho, and every once in a while the Sheriff would visit them. She talks about her mother, the Sheriff, and a Jake Wayfarer guy." The four looked at each other. "Has anyone ever heard of this guy?"

Wayfarer ... The name did not seem strange to Mike. He certainly had heard somewhere.

"Okay, no one knows who he is, Dustin. He was probably the boyfriend of this fake mother of El." Lucas stated taking the diary from Will's hands. He flipped through the object for a few moments before picking out a particular page and throwing it over Mike. "If you still have any questions, she's going to disappear right away."

Mike no longer had any doubts about El's identity, but curiosity spoke louder and soon he was looking at a somewhat crooked female calligraphy.

It's all right, everything is absolutely fine. It's hard to think about this when a huge van comes to me without giving any indication that it will brake and try to stop the accident that is about to happen.

The boys around me are terrified, I can feel their fear and I know how terrified they are. Well, I'm not. I do not know if it's because I know it's all just a crazy dream or because I'm being invaded by a sudden surge of courage, the only thing I know is that I'm not afraid. I feel confident, as if nothing could stop me.

I know that the disinhibition of fear is the effect of the dream when I stare at the van fixedly and it simply overturns into nothing and, doing the impossible, passes over our heads.

Another dream. You know, I'm starting to get tired of having those dreams. It's all so silly and illogical. This time I am alone, confined by white walls and being guided by a man who I call "papa". I do not like this man, he does not give me confidence...

He closed the diary, sweaty hands. Boundaries, his curiosity had limits and he could not overtake them.

"Do you still have any questions?" Lucas asked in a tone of superiority that Mike hated.

"I did not have any more questions, if you wanted to know." Mike shook his head in a faint denial.

They were silent for a few seconds, the four of them not knowing how to go on. El was back, she was alive, but she did not know who she was or where she had come from. El believed to be a person she

was not. What they should do: tell her that the life she was leading was a lie or tell her it was a government experiment but, above all else, she was friends with them.

"So?" Will rolled onto the floor to give Dustin room to sit beside him. "We're going to tell her, right?"

"Tell her she's not who she thinks she is?" Mike asked dryly. "To tell her that her life is a lie, that the woman she defended at school last week is not her mother, is that it?"

"So we'll let her stay in the dark?" Will stirred. He still wore a low tone of voice, but Mike knew that beneath that calm there was a small volcano about to erupt. "Are we going to let her live a lie? Are we going to be accomplices of what you're doing with her?"

"MICKEY! Mike!"

The basement door opened with a deafening thud, and within seconds an exulting Holly was coming down the stairs.

"Mike." She ran to her older brother. "I have to tell you something, something very important."

"Anything important, Holls?" Mike greeted ignoring the look of outrage that the girl was exchanging with his friends. Holly had been highly annoyed with Mike's friends since they'd kicked her out of the basement about a month ago. "Kind of life or death?"

The blonde played against Mike in response.

"Yes, yes, yes, yes!" She then lowered her voice, as if telling a secret. "Do you know who's here at home? Your girlfriend!"

"I do not have a girlfriend, Holly!" He said resisting the urge to roll his eyes. "Who are you talking about?"

"Sophie is not your girlfriend?" Holly replied with another question, her face wrinkled with confusion. "She's going to be someday, I know that. Anyway, Mommy's taking care of her up there. Her hand is hurt."

Everyone was silent and their eyes widened at the sound of the name he was wearing ... she was there, a few steps away from him. It was really her and this time there was no doubt about it.

A quick exchange of glances was enough for the boys to go into a consensual moment and were on the stairs jostling each other to see who came into the living room first.

They found her curled up on the couch, her face stained by an unearthly trail of tears. She looked the same as ever - glasses, jeans, all star, lace shirt, and a gray wool cardigan - but somehow it also looked different from the person he had grown accustomed to in the last few days. This was El, the girl who had escaped from a laboratory, and at the same time it was Sophie, the sweet girl who had punched Troy in the face.

El stared at her hands with a look of sadness, too self-absorbed to notice the four boys and the little girl or anything. She was in her own world.

Mike caught his breath knowing he should go talk to her, the girl who had occupied his thoughts in the last few months.

Perhaps sensing the closeness of the small group, El lifted his eyes from his hands and stared at them. For a moment she looked shocked at the sight of the four boys, her delicate face distorting into a grimace of disappointment. It was as if she was not happy to see them.

"Hi." She nodded, her brown eyes avoiding them at all costs.

It hurt to see her so sad, so devoid of joy and smiles to offer. Mike had grown accustomed to the spontaneous smiles she'd let loose beneath Sophie Eileen's skin and she seemed to be so sad.

"What are you doing here at Mike's?" Will asked as everyone crowded around El (Mike being pushed by Holly and Lucas to sit beside her). "Did something happen?"

Mike wanted to blame Will for his indiscreet questions, wanted to stop him from asking things that clearly made him uneasy, but he did

not do it for lack of courage. He did not want to look rude in front of her, did not want to make her impression worse.

"That happened."

El held out his hand so that the four boys could see the result of pounding the face of the school bully. They held their breath. Her hand was really bad; the joints were swollen and purple, there were small wounds with dry blood. Not that Mike was a broken hands specialist, but he was smart enough to identify a broken hand.

"Does not look too bad." Lucas commented innocently. In the background Mike suspected that he was only talking about it to boost El's morale and also to gain his confidence. "Can you fiddle?"

"No. My uncle said it was broken. "She told us completely desolate." It was normal until yesterday, but today dawned like that. "

The four boys gaped as Holly, more curious than shocked, leaned over her older brother to see the wound more closely.

"You broke your hand just by punching Troy's face?"

"That's awesome!" Dustin exclaimed in ecstasy. "You're my hero."

But Dustin's compliment did not cheer her up, on the contrary. She looked about to cry.

"I did not want to hurt him, but ..."

"He was talking about your mother." Mike completed gently. Or at least he was talking about the person he said was his mother. "Okay, we understand. Are you going to the hospital?"

El shook his head hurriedly.

"My uncle said your mother could handle it." She stated looking into Mike's eyes and giving a small smile to the silent antics that Holly was putting on her brother's shoulder. "He said she was a good nurse by the time she worked at the hospital and maybe she could help."

Mike nodded and blushed at the puzzled look on his face.

His family (his father, in particular) liked to ignore the time when Karen had worked at the local hospital as a nurse. He and Holly were not born at that time, but Nancy had told them about the golden age of Karen Wheeler as a nurse. She had told them that their mother was always late, but that did not influence the love or the smile she always had on her face because she was helping those who needed it. Karen had abandoned her job as a nurse shortly after Mike's birth for reasons that Nancy had always refused to tell.

"Of course my mother will know what to do." Mike said struggling to keep Holly from falling headlong on one of her mischiefs. "She'll make your hand look good."

El smiled at him and winced slightly when Mike's mother, accompanied by Jim Hopper and a tall man, came out of the kitchen with a small first aid box.

"Hi, honey." Karen smiled kindly as he knelt before her. "Let me see your hand, okay? I need to know what I'm dealing with."

At the end of the day El's hand was not broken, but it had hardly been that. Mike and Holly's mother, ignoring the children and boys who were commonly seen in the Wheelers' house, bandaged the girl's hand while instructing her about what to do or not do.

As Mike's mother spoke El's brown eyes became more and more swollen. At one point, Mike noticed with a tight throat that she could not contain herself anymore and had given up her tears.

"Come on, honey, it's no big deal." Hopper encouraged El as Karen finished the bandage. "Soon your hand will be fine."

Mike suppressed the disgust he felt at the sound of the Sheriff's voice, the man who had been hiding El from them for obscure reasons. He had faked El's death and was still faking it. What could he feel for a person doing something like that?

"Try not to move your hand, dear." Mike's mother asked softly in her voice as she held out a small pill for him to take. "This medicine will make you sleepy, sweetheart, but it will ease the pain you are feeling. Tomorrow I assure you that you will not feel any pain."

Karen caressed the bandages she had made in El's hand and then turned to the two men asking her to accompany her into the kitchen. She was furious for some reason Mike and the others could not understand.

El studied the bandages that covered his hand and it gave Mike and the others the opportunity to see the small tattoo she carried on her wrist. 011. The number, tattooed with permanent black paint, was almost invisible underneath the bandages, but Mike was determined not to lose any detail that could prove he was not dreaming, that Sophie Eileen was really El.

Noticing where Mike's eyes were focused, he hid his hand under his arm and almost immediately let out a loud whimper of pain. In the rush to hide the tattoo, she had hurt herself and finding that made Mike feel guilty. His curiosity had caused her to get hurt.

"Are you alright?" Will asked her and then blushed when everyone, even Holly with her praiseworthy innocence, gave him a look of death. Of course she was not well. Why did Will always ask such questions? "It's just ... You do not look very well. You look like you have not slept in the last few days."

"I do not think I slept at all. I've had many nightmares." She murmured, shrinking a little more against the couch, the mere memory of the nightmares she had been making her shudder. "I write about them in my diary." A sigh of sadness. "I lost my diary on the day of the fight with Troy's idiot. I have no more how to write about my nightmares."

They all fell into indigestible silence; El for lamenting the loss of the diary and the boys for feeling the burden of guilt. They were in possession of the diary she thought and regretted losing.

Mike did not understand the girls' fixation on their diaries (he had not understood this with Nancy and still did not understand now what happened to El), but if El was losing sleepless nights because he had no diary, to do was return it to her. He nudged Lucas subtly and did not have to say anything to his friend to know what the purpose was.

"No," Lucas said so that only he could hear it, his dark eyes pleading. "I have not finished reading yet, there may be other things that can help us." And then when Mike was irreducible on the subject: "O.K. It will be your way, as always."

Lucas threw the diary into Mike's arms and immediately composed himself as he met his eyes. She, who did not seem to have heard any part of the dialogue, leaned down enough to be near Mike and he smelled her scent. Orchids. Now he would love the smell of orchids.

"It's my diary?" She held out her hands like a willing child and smiled at the object as Mike handed it to her. "You found him! Where were you?"

"Will found, did not he, Will? He said he was in the hallway of the school." Mike said grabbing Holly when the girl, in one of her plays, almost fell face down on the floor. She pulled the blondie close to her so she would not overdo it in her play.

El did not ask if anyone had read his diary. No, now that she had the journal in her hands, nothing else seemed to disturb her. She just flipped through the object and smiled as she pulled out a small photograph she kept there.

"Hi Mom."

No, she's not your mother. She is the woman who deceived you in recent months by pretending to be your mother, Mike thought looking and admiring the photograph at the friends who now bent over El as if their lives depended on it.

It was a beautiful photo, only a madman would deny it. In the photo, El, with her short hair trimmed with a wreath of small white flowers, smiled happily in summer dress as she was hugged by a beautiful woman with strawberry blonde hair. Anyone who had that photograph in their hands and did not know the whole truth as he knew would say that it was the perfect portrait of mother and daughter.

Mike stared at the photograph without blinking, within himself a growing sense of familiarity. That woman, he had seen her

somewhere before. It forced the mind for a few seconds and then gotcha!

He knew exactly where he knew Susan Eileen. He had already seen her in Hawkins talking to Sheriff Hopper on the outskirts of the police station. (It was hard not to notice a woman whose elegance stood ten feet away). But it was not Mike's more vivid memory of her. Mike knew her because he had dreamed of her; she was the woman to find El in that strange dream. Susan Eileen was the woman who had saved him from being an unnamed corpse in Hawkins.

"She's beautiful," Dustin sighed, exposing his opinion, as well as his friends who did not have the guts enough to look gorgeous and then corrected himself when he realized the smiling woman was breathing more. "Your mother was beautiful, Soph."

"It was yes" El agreed sounding melancholy.

Mike was not paying attention to the beauty of the blonde-haired woman (or redhead, he did not care much for the nomenclature that the colors received), was too focused on hints about her nature, anything that indicated if she had been a good or bad person. Nothing. The only thing Mike could find in the image of the deceased was an aura of pure joy.

Susan Eileen had not been a bad person for El, but that did not change the fact that she had lied to the girl. The same thing happened to Sheriff Hopper: he clearly did not want to hurt El, but he was still lying to her and hiding from everyone. Maybe he had his motives and they were even justifiable, but Mike did not believe he could relieve or forgive that.

Soon the remedies given by Karen Wheeler began to take effect and thus the brightness of El was soon being extinguished.

Embracing the diary as if it were her life, El even tried to talk to the boys (she believed that the next day she could go to school), but soon failed miserably. The yawns became frequent, the voice growing smoother and the brown eyes blinking repeatedly. Within ten minutes El was already asleep on the Wheelers couch and was veiled by four worried boys and a little blondie who could not understand

why the older woman had succumbed to sleep so early.

For an hour, at least that night, they entered into a silent agreement. They would not torment her with anything. El deserved to rest, forget the problems she had as Sophie and they forget the problems she had like Him.

Then they would think about what would be done, preferably when she was in a more stable emotional state.

17. The Aftermath of the Inverted World Explode in the Wheelers Basement

"I cannot believe my uncle let me spend the afternoon at his house." He said, ecstatic. "That's fantastic."

Mike smiled at El's excited comment, but above all at the possibility of being away from the heavy atmosphere of Hawkins High School.

It had been a day full of hostile looks and whispered nasty words wherever they went. El had dealt with all the glances (perhaps because he had already faced the worst, even if he did not remember it), following down the corridor with his chin raised just as she did at that very moment.

Unfortunately for Mike and the others, they had never faced the worst as El had, and they could not ignore the stares or curb their own reactions. As Will and Dustin glared at anyone who dared to look at El, Max and Lucas babbled curses in a veiled voice at the most daring. It was Mike's job to distract him during class, lunchtime, and now, when it was time to leave. He could not complain about it, not really; doing so made him closer to her.

"Yeah, fantastic." Mike could not hide the excitement he felt.

Mike blushed as El hopped onto the bike's back and passed the only good hand around his waist to steady himself. It had been a requirement of Jim Hopper that she not walk on rollerblades during the recovery of her nearly broken hand (putting on and taking off the skates would require much of her injured hand) and, despite grunting too much in the face of restraint of her freedom, the girl had accepted the order.

"Maybe we can start a new Dungeons and Dragons campaign!" Will commented with a proud smile on his lips. He and his friends had been watching the interaction between El and Mike, charmed by the harmony between them. "You could be the lost princess, Soph."

Everyone agreed, even Max, who hated any mention of the princesses, agreed with a subtle smile on his lips. It was the turn of El blush.

"Princess? I do not think I'm very fit for that role ..."

"Nonsense!" Dustin smiled suggestively toward El and Mike. "You agree with me, Mike?"

The Wheeler stammered a positive response and started pedaling toward his own house before his friends put him into more embarrassing situations.

They were silent for a few minutes, unable to say anything that would embarrass them. But then Mike's curiosity overcame his hesitation. It was fascinating the way she spoke, the excitement that pained her voice at every word uttered. She was a fascinating girl as much as Sophie as El.

Mike wanted to know everything about her, about this El that did not have to carry the weight of a past full of horrors and that could smile for any nonsense. But he also wanted to know what had happened to her, which had made her forget everything that had happened.

"What was your mother like?" He inquired, breaking the silence between them.

For a millisecond it seemed that she was thinking of jumping off the bike. But then she took a deep breath and with that Mike knew she would get an answer.

"She was incredible, in every way, Mike. Beauty, intelligence, character." El's hand tightened on Mike's coat. "She had strawberry blond hair, you know, that kind of hair that some might interpret as blond as redhead and blue eyes like Max's."

There was an undeniable reverence in El's voice. Each word uttered was so full of love that Mike felt sorry for her, for the lie they wore around her.

"My mother was just like any other mother, I guess." El counted playing with the button on Mike's coat, too distracted to realize what

he was doing. "I think the only strange thing was that she exaggerated when it came to protecting me. She hated that I go out alone, said there were bad people in the world and she could not bear to be harmed." She pondered for a few minutes. "Bad men can take you away from me, my dear, that's what she was talking about when I asked to roller skating in front of our apartment."

Mike shuddered to hear her speak about the bad men. It was as if they were back in 1983 while El told about the bad men who were after her and then asked that Mike not call his mother. He could almost see her there before him, the two of them alone in the basement as she pointed an imaginary weapon at him.

"And your father?"

Another memory, this time a bad memory and that he would give everything to forget. The tall white-haired man who had invaded the school in search of El, the one she had called 'papa'. To this day none of them would know the man's name had Will not heard the bastard's name during a conversation between his mother and Sheriff Hopper. Brenner, that was how Joyce had called the bastard he knew for papa.

It was a cruel thought and desire, but Mike fervently hoped the demogorgon had killed Brenner that night. The least the universe could do to compensate for all that had happened to her in that lab was that.

El squeezed Mike's waist at the mention of the word 'father'. She did not seem to like to touch the subject, much less the word in question.

"My mother said he abandoned us when I was six."

"Your mother said, you do not remember him?" Mike pressed down feeling awful.

"No. I do not remember him or anything that happened before six months ago. If I try hard to remember, the most I can get is a headache and a nosebleed."

Mike pushed harder to stay ahead and thus preserve the moment they

shared. Of course he would tell his friends everything later, but that was a moment of both, and Mike wanted to make the most of it.

"Amnes ..." El stuttered the word as if he had difficulty pronouncing it. Another attempt: "Amnezi ... Argh!"

Mike suppressed a smile, familiar with her difficulty in pronouncing certain words, but also aware that it would be wrong to smile at that moment.

"Amnesia," he completed gently. "Is that it?"

She whispered a timid "yes", shy of the flaw she'd just committed.

"Yeah. Well, my mom said the amnesia." Mike felt her shaking as he pronounced the word correctly. "It's a sequel to a tumor-removal operation. Short hair, nosebleeds and occasional headaches are also sequels to the operation."

So here was the story they had invented for her and, Mike could not deny, it was a great story. They had created a life for her, a life of lies. The perfect lie was told under more than perfect circumstances.

Short hair, nose bleeding from time to time, past nonexistent ... All this generated a land more than conducive to lies and the creation of a false life. Poor El. What would it be of her to find out that everything she was telling was a lie? How destroyed would her heart be when she learned that Sophie Eileen, the girl who loved her mother and her uncle, was a lie and that she was really a government experiment?

Mike felt a sudden surge of anger, the upset stomach of all the adults around El. Everyone had done something with El: some had manipulated her while others, however good their intentions, had fooled her with lies and more lies. This was so unfair. They deserved none of it.

"Your mother seemed to be a good person." Mike said and realized he was being honest.

He got off the bike and was helping El down when Dustin, Max, Will and Lucas joined them with suggestive smiles. Ignoring them, Mike

entered the house.

The entrance hall and living room of the Wheeler House were completely deserted. There was no sign of Holly or Karen Wheeler. The two of them had probably gone out to a friend's house in Karen or to the market. The second hypothesis turned out to be the most correct one after finding a note pasted on the refrigerator door.

Michael, I went to the market with your sister. I'll be back soon. Behave while I'm gone. Kisses, Mommy.

PS: Jim Hopper called and advised that he and his friend, Jake Wayfarer, will be coming to get his friend by five-thirty.

Mike was just finishing up the note when a low thud echoed through the house. He stumbled back into the living room and found everyone looking as stunned as himself. Okay, the noise was not caused by any of them.

"What the ...?"

Everyone shrugged. Except for El, she stared at the floor with her cheeks red and her eyes blinking wildly behind the spectacle lenses.

"I think it came from your basement." She said. "Your dog, perhaps?"

"My father is allergic to anything he has or feathers; no way." Mike replied thinking about how many times he had asked for a dog as a birthday present and how many times Ted Wheeler had denied it and even repressed it. "I'll see what it is, you ..."

"I'll go with you!" They all responded in unison.

Mike simply opened the basement door and walked downstairs as quietly as possible in the company of five other teenagers. They expected an assailant, an invading ferret, the most pessimistic, a second demogorgon ... Anyway, they expected anything less than what they found.

Mike stared at the scene, beyond disbelief. Nancy, completely disheveled, lay sprawled in the arms of Jonathan Byers. They both wore nothing but their underwear. Nothing more.

"What the hell ...?" Mike exclaimed loud and clear, his voice uneven and his face red with embarrassment and anger. "In my basement, Nancy ?! Really?"

Nancy and Jonathan walked quickly away from the blatant, old face and panting.

"Mike?" Nancy gasped and tried to cover herself with a cushion as she noticed the gaze of the other teenagers accompanying the boy. "What are you doing here?"

"I live in this house, Nancy! I live in this crap house and I spend most of my time here, in this basement." He gathered a dress from the floor and tossed it over his older sister. "Get dressed! For God's sake, get dressed!"

"Jonathan can remain so if he wants." Max's dreamy sigh echoed through the basement making Will's older brother blush furiously. "I'm loving the vision."

Mike turned his back to the couple and then shot Dustin, Lucas and Will at the sight of the three directing Nancy.

"Stop looking at my sister!" Mike fought a very friendly punch on Lucas's arm. "Stop staring at her! And I do not want comments! I do not want to hear about it!"

Nancy and Jonathan together. Together! When could Mike have imagined that? Never! The two had spent a lot of time together since Barb Holland's death, but Mike had trusted Nancy's word that there was nothing between her and Jonathan. He had believed not only that he was giving the older sister a vote of confidence but also how different the two older teens were. They were like water and wine, different in every possible way. But even with these differences, there they were together.

Mike groaned at the thought that this was not the first time Nancy and Jonathan had been grappling on the basement couch. He wanted to die just to imagine how many other times the two of them had done such things in the basement while it was empty.

"No, Jonathan, you do not have to wear the T-shirt ... Damn it, Jonathan! Max lamented maliciously. "Nancy, you're so lucky."

"Has he already dressed?" El, who had been keeping his eyes closed, asked anyone in particular. "Are they all dressed up? There's no one else ... You know ... Almost naked?"

"They're already dressed, Soph." Max replied looking at Jonathan sadly. "What a shame in Jonathan's case. Anyway, you can already open your eyes and you can be sure that later on we'll both talk about your excess of modesty as we watch some hot photos I have of Michael J. Fox without ... "

"I do not want to talk about it, Maxine, not with you."

"Yeah, but we'll talk!"

Mike turned to Nancy and Jonathan, his dark eyes assessing the couple. Jonathan seemed to want to get away from it and Max's comments while Nancy, now dressed, seemed more confident than she was a few seconds ago. Damn it! That scene would have been part of Mike's nightmares for a long time. His sister, on the preliminaries of ... She shivered, angry.

"Are you going to tell Mommy?" Nancy asked without regret.

"Were not you dating Steve?" The boy countered, unable to face his sister directly.

"No. We broke up about a week ago. It was not working out any better between the two of us. We're friends now." The blonde sighed. "Are you going to tell Mommy?"

"No, but you really should ..."

But what Nancy should do or fail to do was never said. Will did not allow it. The boy began to cough, and before anyone could stop him, he was bowing and putting out what he had had earlier.

In the end, it was not lunch that Will put out. Without blinking, Mike and the others saw Will vomit a gooey thing that was moss-colored. He let out a shriek of horror as the green thing began to crawl with a

slow sinuity toward the bathroom.

"Will, my God!" Jonathan exclaimed.

"Holy shit!" Max let out his horrified blue eyes, horrified. "Will, what ...?"

Another fit of coughing and another creepy creature. Will, once again, did not allow his friends to fall into the horror of what they had just witnessed; ignoring the older brother's calls, he turned to El and, with his green eyes completely unfocused, grabbed the girl's shoulders.

"Will, what are you doing? Please leave me, will you?" El pleaded softly, his voice shaking with fear. "Will, please, I really do not like this."

Will ignored her or at least did not seem to listen to her. He seemed to be in a trance, in a dimension where no one could reach him anytime soon.

Mike looked at Jonathan and Nancy for help. Anything. The teenage couple was paralyzed with everything they saw.

"Will, please, you're scaring me ..."

Will continued in a trance.

"He's close, very close." Will shook El's shoulders violently causing her to whimper in fear. "Less than a month for everything to be completely destroyed ..."

El managed to flee from Will's hands and immediately hid behind Jonathan and Nancy, the two older people who should put order into the situation.

"Make him stop the crap he's making." She whimpered after Max and then back at Mike as Will chased her with his arms outstretched. The two seemed to be playing cat and mouse. "Please, Will, I do not know what you're talking about."

Max and Jonathan stood in Will's way, preventing him from

advancing or coming near him.

"He is close and you know it. You see it as I see ... OW!"

Will howled in pain when Max, looking furious, kicked at his cinnamon.

"Shit, Byers! Are you crazy? Lost your head? What the fuck is that ?! Stop chasing after my friend! "

Ignoring Max's screams, Lucas, Jonathan, and Dustin rushed to pat Will as he began to tip to and fro, about to collapse. Mike would have joined all three if he had not grabbed her arm and kept him from going.

"You said it did not happen often, said it was a difficult thing to do, Will." Jonathan scowled at the overprotective father.

"What you saw?" Lucas asked. "How close are you?"

"Just ... Close."

"Oh, man, we'll die!" Dustin lamented loudly. "We will die!"

The green and wide eyes of Will clung to the eager face of Him. She still had not left behind Mike, and judging by the way she trembled, she would not do it anytime soon.

"I'm sorry, El ..." Will sobbed loudly, his eyes glistening with tears. "I'm really sorry, Eleven."

"That's not my name. Stop calling me that, please." El asked fading behind Mike.

Will fled the grip of the two friends and bowed again to expel more green things.

Mike turned to Lucas and accused them with his eyes, torn between feeling worried and angry. Something had happened during the last weekend, something they had not told him.

"It does not count for Mom, Jonathan. Please, I do not want to cause any more problems. Everything has gone so well in recent months. Mother with her boyfriend, you with your letter of admission to college." Will moaned, his groggy voice echoing through the basement like a scream. "Please ... It's no big deal, Jonathan, really."

Jonathan, with his arms around the younger brother's body as if he were a baby, helped Will sit on the couch.

The boy had vomped abnormally large green slugs, but that was just plain nonsense. That had happened before. It was not an isolated incident despite Will's insistence.

Mike folded his arms and waited. He was not going to ask for explanations, fearing that when he opened his mouth he could say things he would regret later. Besides, it was not like Jonathan was making room for it.

"What a freak show was that ?!" Max peered back from the bathroom with a glass pot in his hand. Some creepy creatures were stuck there. "What is this, Will? What the hell is this disgusting thing?"

Will did not answer, was too busy arguing with Jonathan to do this. No one there had ever seen an argument between Will and Jonathan (this position had always been occupied by Mike, Nancy, and Holly), not as it was at that very moment.

"Do not tell Mom, Will? Are you really asking me for this ?!"

"Jonathan ..."

"You lied to us, Will, lied to me and Mom. Why did not you tell us that this is so frequent? We could have taken you to the doctor sooner, we could have found a way to ..."

Mike stepped back and did not have to look back to know his friends did the same thing. They were all curious to know what was going on between Will and Jonathan, but no one dared stand between the two of them.

If Mike was really paying attention to what was going on around him, he would realize how adverse the reactions of those around him

were. As Max played with the goofy thing Will had vomited, Dustin and Lucas exchanged glances of pure horror. The only person he was aware but himself was El. She still trembled after him.

Will, looking more and more pale, also seemed to notice El's condition.

"I'm sorry, El ..." He sobbed loudly, not realizing the way he called the girl. "I'm really sorry, Eleven."

Mike felt El shudder to be called that way and for a brief moment of illusion he believed she had felt a small twinge of recognition. For a moment, in the midst of all that mess in the cellar that only gave signs of worsening, it seemed she had remembered something.

"That's not my name. Stop calling me that." El asked grabbing Mike's arm tighter.

Will fled from where Jonathan had sat him and tried to approach El. This action generated another sequence of reactions. He could not get close to El, in fact, could not get up without succumbing to a new coughing fit. El, seeing the attempt to approach, squeezed Mike's arm a bit more as he murmured a string of excuses and more excuses.

"I'm sorry ... I'm really sorry, but ... I do not think I can stay here any longer. Not after that ..." She muttered so that only he could hear her. It looked panicked. "I cannot, Mike ..."

"What, Soph? Are you okay?"

"No, I'm not doing well at all, I need to get out of here." El hyperventilated. "I need ... I do not want to be around him, not with Will acting like this."

El ran up the stairs to the basement and disappeared to the upper floor. Mike looked away at the fort of blankets, his heart clenched with all that was happening. When? When would that hell end? When would El again be herself? When would the Byers nightmare end?

18. Eleven: the "failed" experiment Hawkins laboratory

Sophie did not dare leave Mike's house. For some reason she did not understand very well something prevented her from leaving that house. Something inside her insisted that she stay there because ... It was necessary.

She flinched a little against the sofa of the Wheeler's house when the basement door, the same door she had burst into minutes ago, opened with a startling roar. She almost cried with relief as she met Max's blue eyes and worried.

The redhead sat down on Sophie's side and then, shoulder to shoulder, were silent, listening to the voices coming from the basement. Shouts and more swearing. Tears. Lamentations. Voices changed.

"I cannot believe Jonathan is dating Nancy." Max moaned, resting his head on Sophie's shoulder. "I ... I guess I kind of had a crush on him since I got here in Hawkins."

The two had talked about Max's downfall for certain Hawkins boys (Jonathan Byers, Steve Harrington, Jamie Müller, and Brandon Japsen). It had been a moment when Sophie had chosen to be just a listener and not run the risk of naming Mike Wheeler by accident. It would be embarrassing.

"I do not believe Will vomited a huge green slug." She murmured under her breath, her stomach churning with the thought that the creepy creature was still down there, crawling between the feet of those there.

"Huge? It was not that big, Soph." Max sneered, trying to soften ... Whatever Sophie was feeling after what they had witnessed.

The redhead sighed, aware that she could not keep that subject out of Sophie's ears any longer, especially with the thing that was happening to Will.

The boys had made her promise not to tell anyone at all. But Sophie

was not a nobody. Sophie was a friend and would live with the survivors and aftermath of the inverted world, well, she certainly deserved the truth about everything that had happened last year.

"It's hard to explain, Soph, and I'm not being dramatic when I say that. I was not here, okay? I did not attend or witness anything, but I'll try to explain everything to you."

Sophie heard everything, listening to every word that echoed through the Wheelers' house. Basically, Will had been kidnapped by a monster (a demogorgon) for his world and had been stuck there for a long, crazy week. And then, in the middle of it all, a girl named Eleven had come up. The girl had saved everyone with her strange powers and in the end was gone.

It was an undeniably bizarre story, full of impossible things worthy of a scary book, but even so, it seemed true to her. The story of 1983 gave Sophie a sense of familiarity, as if all those impossible things made sense and fit like little pieces of a crazy puzzle.

The strangeness of everything Max had counted was so exaggerated, so out of reality that it seemed like a dream (or a nightmare, in that case).

"So that thing he threw up ..." Sophie broke off, unable to imagine a plausible explanation for the green slug.

"I do not know, Soph, and I suppose you will not know either." The redhead responded by snuggling a little more on the couch. "The boys are very closed about everything that happened and they're probably going to come up with something to justify the slug that Will vomited."

The screams from the basement rose. Mike's voice, louder and louder, prevailed over the other voices. Even frightened by the shouting, Sophie managed to find a smile to offer Max.

"They will not have to tell us anything, we'll find out on their own." He looked suggestively downstairs. "Let's hear what they're saying."

Max took time to understand what her friend was saying.

"Are you suggesting we listen to their conversation in the sly?"

"Do you know any other way to know what's going on?" Sophie replied with mild sarcasm.

"Your little brown-eyed little devil! I love you, I love you, I love you! I'd kiss you, but I'm sorry I want to have my first kiss with a boy. "

The redhead jumped off the couch, helped Sophie to her feet, and together they bent over the basement door to listen and understand the reason for the excitement.

For a brief moment Sophie and Max believed that the discussion had ceased, that the moods had finally calmed down. The silence they heard was beyond scary. If it had not been for the set of choking breaths and Will's noisy cough, Soph would have thought the place was empty.

But then Mike's voice came. He was no longer shouting or being rude, but his voice echoed through the silent environment like a scream.

"Another monster?"

Sophie shuddered inwardly. She'd barely accepted the idea of a monster, from the demogorgon's existence, and there was Mike asking if there was another.

"Another monster," Will confirmed weakly. "Well, worse than the demogorgon, it's gigantic, the size of a thirty-story building, several legs and heads, like a hydra."

Several legs and arms, a hydra ... Sophie's mind was lost in insights of the nightmares she had been having. In the last few days the freckle-faced boy had vanished from Sophie's dreams and had been replaced by a monster identical to what Will had just described. The creature of nightmares was gigantic, but not invincible.

"We need Eleven, only she can help us with this thing. If it does not help us ... We will all die."

"Die?" Dustin stammered, perplexed.

"That's what will happen if we do not tell her she's Eleven." A noisy cough followed. "We need to tell Sophie that she's Eleven. We're going to die if we do not tell her."

"And if we do that we'll hurt her." Mike's sister's voice echoed through the basement. She sounded worried. "What are you going to say? Hi, Sophie, how are you? So, basically, your life is a big lie. This is not your real name. Your name is Eleven, you spent your entire life trapped in a laboratory being a living experiment and ... We want you to kill another monster, can you? Is that what you plan to do? "

"No," She heard Mike whisper. "We do not want to hurt her, I do not want to."

"Basically it." Will snapped over Mike in a gravelly voice. "We need her and her powers."

Sophie stepped back from the basement door and, trembling, retreated to the wheelers' couch. A small part of her was aware that Max was there beside her, calling her and asking her if she was okay. But then there was the other part, the one that succumbed slowly to a horrible headache and the violent wave of distressing feelings.

She could not be that Eleven. She was certainly not such Eleven; it was impossible. She was Sophie Eileen, the niece of Sheriff Hopper, the daughter of Susan Eileen and ... Who? Who was her father?

The image of the man with white hair and cool blue eyes with whom she dreamed exploded in her mind. Papa ... El let out a loud groan. No, that man was not her father. A father would not do what the bad dream man did. Hurt, scream, arrest ...

Be a good girl, Eleven. Obey your papa.

Another session of distorted images and then she saw herself confined by white walls, surrounded by people in white coats. A hospital, she was remembering the hospital where she had woken up. But if it was a hospital, why the hell were the doctors so cold, why did they hurt her and why did they call her Eleven? She was not the Eleven. It could not be.

Moaned loudly when he felt a hammer inside the head. Were they hitting her? Why was her head hurting so much? Headaches were common in her life, but none had been like the one she was feeling.

"Soph, what have you got? Sophie? Oh my God, your nose is bleeding!" Max grunted, grabbing her face to see the blood more closely.

At that moment it hurt to breathe. It hurt to blink. It hurt to move. It hurt to hear Max calling her Sophie.

"My head is exploding." Her moan reverberated through the house. "It hurts, Maxie, it hurts a lot."

"What can I do to help you? A cold compress? Water?"

"The bathroom," Sophie gasped out loud. "I think I'm going to vomit."

And then with a fucking "fucking shit," Max guided Sophie through the aisles of the Wheeler's house.

Sophie collapsed on the floor of the Wheelers' bathroom and tossed everything in her stomach into the toilet. Or at least it should have been that way. Just as Will had done a few minutes ago, she did not vomit what was expected. It was not a green slug, but it was not less grotesque, either. Blood. A trickle of blood escaped the girl's lips, which now lay pale on the floor.

Pain. All she could feel was a strong pain that now split between her head and her stomach. Her world was made of the purest raw pain.

"I'll call someone to help us. I cannot leave you alone like this, what do I do, what do I do?" Max whimpered and stroked her friend's hair. "NANCY! JONATHAN! SOMEBODY HELP ME!"

Sophie leaned down again and a new spell made herself visible and heard.

"Shit, shit, shit ..." El wiped his mouth and nose with the sleeve of his jacket, his head throbbing. "Help me out of here."

The redhead did not hesitate to help her. The two had barely reached

the hallway (Max struggled to take her friend's weight) when they were intercepted by Jonathan, Nancy, and everyone who a few minutes ago had gathered in the basement. Everyone looked at them as if they were two ghosts.

"What is it, Max? What does she have?"

Sophie's knees gave in to a new burst of images in her mind and she would have fallen face down on the floor were it not for a quick movement of Jonathan Byers.

A pink dress. A blonde wig. An impromptu bath in the middle school gym. Three boys on their bikes and one lost in the middle of hell. Freckles. A monster. Bad men. Shots. Blood. Blood. Too much blood spilled. Promises thrown in the wind.

She let out a loud growl as Jonathan snuggled her into his arms. It hurt. Her head was about to explode.

"Take her to my room, Jonathan. I'll call Sheriff Hopper." The terrified voice of Nancy Wheeler instructed.

"It'll be all right, soon the pain will pass." Jonathan murmured so that only Sophie could hear him. He sounded clumsy and worried.

Ignoring Jonathan and his reassuring words, Sophie groaned and fought his touch. She did not want him to touch her, she did not want his comfort. The only thing she was that the pain was over. Pain was all about pain.

With a last groan, Sophie's world faded into darkness. The pain she would face from now on could not compare to anything she had ever felt.

While she was reluctant at every step, fearful of what awaited her, the white-haired man hauled her with iron determination. He seemed furious with her and something she had done.

"Papa ..." started to say and then stopped in front of a sharp poke in the arm.

"Shut up, Eleven. Stay silent."

She hesitated for a moment.

"Sorry?" She was not really apologizing, she was just trying to escape the horror of being locked in the dark room. She did not want to stay in that room after seeing herself in front of that monster.

Papa stopped walking and looked into her eyes for a few seconds before resuming her walk. He had ice-cold blue eyes with no sympathy. He was her dad, the man who had raised her, but he did not like her. If he liked her he would not have hurt her, he would not have locked her in a dark little room.

Papa did not like her, and now that feeling was mutual. She did not like him any more, she just could not love him after all the tears he had made her shed. It was impossible to like someone who had locked her in a dark room and forced her to kill cute animals.

In a rush of courage, impelled by the blinking red lights, she wanted to push him away from her. When it happened, when he flew into the air, Papa looked shocked. She was not to admire his shock (though it was a really interesting happening); he ran out and got into the first little room he found. He had to get out of there. She needed to be saved.

• •

"What's your name?"

She stared into the face of the black-haired boy without expression, suspicious of the question he asked. Taking into consideration the way he treated her, how he had offered warm clothes and a place where she could rest he was reliable. Yes, he definitely was trustworthy.

*Eleven lifted the sleeve of his blue blouse to allow him to see the number engraved on it. **011**. That was her name.*

The boy frowned, as if her name was the strangest thing he had ever seen in his life. Eleven noticed, with a tiny twinge of charm, that the stars on his face became more evident as he paled.

"My God, you have a tattoo! Can I see?" He urged her forward to take her

wrist to see better and immediately by getting her back. "Sorry, it's just ... I've never seen a tattoo so closely and my mother certainly would not let me make one."

They were both silent. Eleven was already accustomed to silence, but the boy did not and seemed to feel the need to fill the environment with words. She be like him and know how to fiddle with words, know how to put out everything he felt.

"Okay ... Eleven? That's your name, right?"

She nodded fervently, delighted at how he uttered everything he thought. She was also enchanted by the stars in his face and wondered how they had been trapped there.

"Well, my name is Mike, short for Michael." He hesitated. "Maybe we can call you El, short for Eleven. Could it be?"

She nodded again, a feeling of happiness invading her. She was no longer a number, now she had a name.

• •

He had jumped off the cliff. He had jumped to certain death. What was Mike Wheeler's problem, why the hell had he done that?

Feeling a mixture of anger and concern, El lifted Mike's body and pulled him back to dry land, to safety. He could not hurt himself, she could not allow the star-faced boy to get hurt.

• •

"Eleven!" Mike screamed and tried to run to stop what she was about to do.

Keeping her eyes on the demogorgon, she lifted a hand and made Mike stay out of harm's way. Why was he so stubborn? Why was not he hiding just like Dustin and Lucas were doing? Argh, Mike Wheeler, I'm just trying

to take care of you. You have to go back to your house, mouth breather!

Eleven risked a look in Mike's direction as a pained sob cut through the heavy atmosphere that hung in the room. He was crying. Why was he crying when, at that very moment, Will was being saved and the monster was about to die? The demogorgon had hurt him, was that it? Well, if that was the demogorgon he had to pay for hurting a kid as gentle and kind as Mike Wheeler.

"Goodbye, Mike." She let go when she really wanted to say that everything from that moment on, wanted to assure him that his life would be back again and that his friend would be all right, but that she could not stay to see all this happen.

Eleven turned to the demogorgon, the disgusting creature who was clinging to the wall and struggling with all the strength he had to loosen up and kill everyone in the city. Oh, yes, he wanted to kill; his thirst for blood was noticeable and it was what most encouraged her to do what she was about to do.

The world stopped screaming as she began to scream. She was in charge and demanded that the monster cease to exist. This was not his place and she had to return it before more damage was done, before Mike's other friend was taken.

Darkness, mingled with blood and everything she had thrown from the body of the demogorgon, soon took hold of everything around her. The monster was being destroyed and so was she, but it was all right: Mike was getting well and that was all that mattered.

• •

She listened to Mike's voice almost every day. His voice echoed through the emptiness of the inverted world like a ghost. Every now and then Eleven believed he was really there, but she did not grin when she realized it was not true. No. Not being there was a good thing, it meant he was home, safe and sound, away from danger.

Listening to his voice almost every day did not lessen the horror of being trapped in that decaying place. Nothing seemed concrete in that place,

everything she touched fell apart in powder or, in some cases, not very isolated, in a disgusting gooey goo.

Eleven herself was a gooey, disgusting thing. Her body was covered with remains of demogorgon and remains of the inverted world. The beautiful bright pink dress Mike had borrowed was no longer so bright or gorgeous. The shoe was not even the shadow of what it had been. Mike certainly would not find her pretty if he saw her now.

With a weary sigh, she laid her head on the version of the blanket of blankets that the inverted world offered her, her stomach rumbling with hunger. With a mind clouded by exhaustion and hunger, El thought that he might be able to go for food later. Maybe the Eggos were waiting for her just like they did once in a while.

. . .

She blinked, too dazed to know anything. In fact, she did not know anything: she did not know where she was or what her name was. The only thing she knew was that her head was aching and that the noisy machines around her did not help much to lessen this pain.

"That's not right, Suzie." A man's voice echoed outside the room. She cringed, frightened by the intensity he used in her words. "You cannot do this to this girl, Suzie. It's awful. Hopper, who can help me here, please?"

"Susan, I'm grateful that you've been taking care of her in the last few months, but I have to agree with your husband, you cannot do that, it's wrong to fool her like that."

"Wrong? Wrong is what they did to her. The poor girl deserves a family, Hop, and I want to give her that." A woman, the one the girl believed to be Susan / Suzie, bellowed, irreducible. "I'm going to be her mother and you can be her father Jake. We're finally going to have our daughter, is not this fantastic?"

"I cannot do this, Suzie. I cannot be conniving with this lie."

"So that's your choice, stay away from me?"

"I choose not to fool this poor girl, that's my choice."

A brief moment of silence.

"You promise to take care of her? She's had enough, Susan, I do not want anything else to hurt this child."

"Hop, sweetie, of course I'll take care of her. She's my daughter, right?"

Three people stormed the room. Two men (one burly and blue-eyed and one tall, thin and grumpy) and one woman. The woman had blond hair (or would it be red?), Warm blue eyes and a lighted smile. She was beautiful, very beautiful.

"You woke up, little sunshine!" The woman exclaimed, running close to her.

The girl pulled away subtly, fearful.

"Who are you?" She asked and then hesitated, "Are you my mother?"

The woman smiled brightly, a warm energy vibrating around her.

"You bet I am. I'm your mother and you, little adorable, are my dear daughter." The redhead / blonde patted her cheeks with a good feeling. "You're my little girl, my dear little Sophie."

Sophie smiled at the woman, glad that her mother was such a lovely and loving woman. For a brief and horrible moment she had thought she was alone, with no one to look after her, but thank heavens she was wrong.

• •

It blew back to the real world. She hesitated a little in opening her eyes, and then she did it at once, realizing that the pain was gone. She was free from the pain, but not free from the internal wounds that now stained her soul.

"I do not call me Sophie." She whispered to herself staring at the ceiling of Nancy Wheeler's room. "The last few months have been a

lie." She laughed sadly. "What a shit."

Still lying on the bed, she felt her face and then smiled as she realized the glasses were still there, gracing her face. An ornament, that's what those glasses were. Sophie Eileen needed that shit, but she did not have to.

With an indignant grunt and a wave of fury running through her veins, she rose from the bed and threw her glasses on Nancy Wheeler's carpeted floor. In a matter of seconds there she was, trampling and screaming at the object with which Susan had given her away.

"YOU'RE A LIE, YOU DO NOT GO ON A GREAT LIE, SOPHIE EILEEN!" She jumped on his glasses, his voice choking with tears. "LIES ... ABSOLUTELY EVERYBODY LIED TO ME! "

The shouting attracted spectators. Soon the door of the room was lined with worried and curious teenagers. Mike was there, looking at her with his dark, warm eyes, thoughts screaming inside his confused head. The problem? Will Byers was there too, and she definitely did not want to see him at that moment.

With her hand held high, she willed the bedroom door to close so that she could finally enjoy the pain and the rage that corroded her. There was a sudden pang inside her head and then done, the door was closed. She had closed the door without moving. The door had closed because that way she had wanted it.

She had closed the door to Nancy Wheeler's room with her mind. With the mind! Normal people did not do that.

With a sore sob, she fell to the floor and lay there. The words that Nancy had poked at Will now echoed inside her mind. *Your name is Eleven, you spent your entire life trapped in a laboratory being a living experience ...*

Eleven, that was her name, the number with which they had registered it in the lab, which had become her name. Eleven. Sophie Eileen was a lie, a great farce. She was Eleven, the 'flawed' experiment in Hawkins's lab, the girl who had released and killed the

demogorgon.

Weeping, she brushed aside some of the bandages that covered her hand and found what she was looking for, what she had denounced who she really was.

011

Sophie Eileen did not exist, the only one that existed was Eleven.

19. The truths that make up her life's mess

She pressed her hands against her ears, trying to muffle the voices and screams that echoed from the outside. Why the boys were screaming as had been her life that had just been destroyed? Why were they talking so loudly?

Moaning loudly, Eleven crawled back to Nancy's bed and buried her face against the mattress, desolate. The voices and screams still lingered there, it was as if they were coming from inside her head and not from outside the room. What if it was that? What if the voices she was hearing were really coming from inside her head?

In a brief moment of madness she believed in the possibility that it was all a horrible nightmare. The voices in the head, the powers, the obscure past in the laboratory, the lies told by the pope; all this was a great nightmare. Soon she would open her eyes and everything would be all right. Absolutely everything would be fine when she woke up from that infernal nightmare.

It was foolish to be fooling around and hiding from the truth. She was not having a nightmare and she definitely would not wake up. That was the real world, her life was that mess and ... the voices really were inside her head.

Listening to voices was a novelty, but what could she do but raise her head and face it with courage? And that's what she did. El took a deep breath, once, twice, three times, trying to mute the voices. Calmness is the key to everything.

Counting up to three was not helpful, but she continued the count and, as a joke in the universe, the screams and voices declined as she reached number eleven. Decreased, but not completely gone.

There was only one voice screaming inside her head and preventing her from hearing herself. Mike. The freckled boy's voice was lingering inside her head, it was as if he, even without knowing what was happening, refused to leave her alone.

He was worried; worried about what was going on with Will, what

his mother would think upon arriving and finding that mess in her house, but mostly he was worried about her. *How can you do that, Mike Wheeler?* El asked mentally as he tried to minimize his thoughts. *How can you care so much about someone who has only brought you suffering since it came into your life?*

Life ... She needed to take care of her life.

She walked toward the window of Nancy's bedroom and admired the view. Jake's car and Hopper's police car were parked in front of the Wheelers' house. They were there, waiting to ... to talk to her or to tell more lies? What could she expect from those two?

But they were not all bad, she thought remembering all that Hopper, Jake and Susan had done for her. Despite always muttering about her, Jake had never done anything to hurt her physically or emotionally. Hopper had always been very loving to her and Susan ... The woman had acted like Karen Wheeler was around Mike and Holly; like a real mother.

"TOC TOC" El jumped, frightened by Max's voice and the knock on the door of the room. "Guess who came to visit you, babe?"

She moaned softly, not too willing to talk to Max or anyone else.

"Go away, Maxie." She asked and wondered how it sounded hoarse. "I-I want to be alone, please."

He could picture Max on the other side of the door, rolling his blue eyes to the predictable answer he received.

"I'm not alone, babe. You know who's here with me? Mike." There was a brief moment of discussion, and El thought he heard Mike utter a loud cry of pain. Had Max hit him? "He's going to talk to you, babe. Things ... Beautiful things that can... su pequeño corazón tan hermoso y magullado."

El stared at the door with glazed eyes. Mike was not someone who said beautiful things under pressure, he stammered, blushed and nothing more came out. It was cute in a funny way. Definitely cute.

She approached the door in slow steps, drawn to an energy that

radiated from the other side.

"El, please open the door. N-we want to be with you. You do not need to talk to us, you know." Mike stammered as she unconsciously leaned her hand against the door handle. "It's just ... it's never good to be alone at times like this."

She opened a crack in the door and found himself staring at an extremely flushed Mike and a Max who could hardly hide his smirk.

"I spent more than half my life alone, Michael Wheeler." El retorted without flexing his voice. "Why should I want company right now?"

She was not being mean or trying to hurt Mike's feelings, not at all. As he spoke, El sought to put out all the anguish that drowned her slowly. It was wrong to tell Mike everything she felt, very wrong, but it had been something automatic, something she had not even had a chance to control.

Please do not hate me for talking to you like this. Please, Mike ...

To El's surprise, Mike did not back down or even looked resentful. No. He stayed exactly where he was, the same position and the same expression.

"Why are not you alone anymore." Mike stared at her. She could literally kill him, but there he was confronting her without any droplets of fear. Did that make him dumb or brave? "You do not have to be alone anymore, El. Never again."

For a moment she just stood there, absorbing the words Mike said. And then, before Mike could get ready mentally and physically, El opened the door and threw himself at him.

She felt his shock at that reaction, the hesitation he had in returning the embrace and the transmutation of it all into a sea of warm and calming feelings. Mike was right, she was not alone anymore; now El had people who cared for her and was not willing to give them up.

She could not contain a sob, not believing that she was really there with Mike. How many times had she thought she would never see him again, that she was destined to die in the inverted world

completely alone?

"I thought I was going to die ..."

"Well, I did not believe that." Mike whispered to her. "I knew you'd find a way to survive."

Why had he believed it while everyone else had given her as dead? Why had Mike Wheeler been stubborn enough to believe she was alive when everything indicated otherwise?

El never came to expose her doubts, not for lack of courage, but for an abrupt interruption made by Max's voice. Oh heavens, she had forgotten about Max's presence! How could El have forgotten her friend?

"I hate to ruin the big reunion of the two, but, you know, the world has not stopped spinning, Will vomited a giant slug and Sheriff Hopper is waiting for you in the living room."

She let out a low growl before finally releasing Mike and consequently forcing him to do the same. Max was right, the world was still spinning and she, El, was still a magnet for trouble. It was all right, she just needed to compose herself and be calm enough to sort things out.

Recompose yourself, El. Show that you do not need the pity of absolutely no one. In a movement familiar to both her and Mike, El passed the sleeve of his gray coat over the blood that stained his nose and the trail of dry tears that lay beneath his brown eyes. She combed her hair with her fingers, tidied up the tiara of stars she had chosen that morning and was ready.

"How do I look?" She asked, leaning her injured hand against herself, making sure she had the number 011 exposed to anyone she wanted to see. "Be honest, I'll know if you're lying."

"What, you're a human lie detector now?" Max laughed.

"A little better than that, Maxie." He inclined his head to both of them. "Mike? Do you want to say something?"

Mike blushed softly.

"You look good ..." He choked and if possible blushed even more. El smiled, not needing him to say something to understand.

"I understand, Mike. And just so you know, that's very kind."

El could not help wondering how Mike's freckles stood out as he blushed or heard Max's sneer giggling. She lifted her head, and with a confidence she did not really feel at the moment, headed for the living room of the Wheelers home.

She already knew what she would find before even reaching the living room, a small privilege of the powers she had, and also a privilege of not being obtuse. Lucas, Dustin, and Nancy argued as they sat on the couch, and each time a couple of boys shot a look of disgust that was not camouflaged in the direction of the two men who were farther away. Hop and Jake. There was no sign of the Byers brothers or their mother.

She cleared her throat and grinned uneasily as all eyes fell on her. This is no time to give back.

"El?" It was Dustin who called her. "You are our El, right? Nothing Sophie?"

"Nothing Sophie." She confirmed, avoiding looking directly at Hopper and Jake. "Only Eleven. El, actually."

"OH MY GOD! EL"

"WEIRD!"

And then Lucas and Dustin were around her, lifting her up in the air, screaming excited words and filling her with kisses on the cheeks.

"You're alive!" Dustin exclaimed, resting his hands on El's shoulders and exposing her to Nancy as if the girl were a precious and expensive object. "Look at her, Nancy. She has hair, she talks and it's still El. Our El!"

El and Nancy waved cordially to each other in a show of recognition.

The two were not friends, they had not even spoken in 1893, but that did not make them dislike each other.

"Your fort of blankets is still there in the basement, completely intact." Lucas recounted and for some reason Mike blushed at that. "Mike refused to take it apart."

"EGGOS!" Dustin exclaimed, startling El and the others there. "You want eggos? You must be hungry, Max said you vomited a lot."

The girl shrank a little at the prospect of eating waffles at that moment, stomach twisting in a mixture of desire and disgust.

"I really do not think I want eggos now, Dustin. I'm kind of nauseous. In fact," El looked at Nancy and Mike. "I kind of wanted to talk privately with the Hopper and Jake ..."

She intended to apologize for being so rude, she would really do it if Mike had not interrupted her and, trampling her words and her friends' complaints, stating that they would do what she was asking as she pushed them all back into the basement. El smiled at him gratefully, then turned to the two men who had been taking care of her.

Hopper, keeping his arms folded in front of his broad chest, tried to maintain his usual tough stance. Her blue eyes kept her at all costs from meeting hers. Jake, on his side, had a smug look on his face, as if he already knew what was about to happen.

Pretending not to notice the way the two adults behaved, El sat down on the Wheelers couch. She still felt a little dizzy and it definitely was not getting easier to contain the thoughts that insisted on breaking into her mind, but she could not back down, not really. El needed to sort things out with those two before finally getting involved in Will Byers' problems.

"So ... You've lied to me for the last few months." El said quietly snuggling on the couch. "Why?"

Hopper moved looking guilty.

"You will judge us, girl?" Jake asked as he started pacing. "That's

right?"

"Look, I've spent my entire life in the dark and now I'm just trying ... to know what happened." She looked at the shoes she wore. "I'm asking why I know you're not bad people, and I know you did not do any of this out of spite."

El's words hung in the air, soft and at the same time heavy. She could look for the truth inside each one's head, yes of course she could, but chose to ask them just as a normal person would have.

Another thing that kept her from getting into the heads of both men was that she sought to preserve both their privacy and not to be invasive of their feelings. They, just as she had noticed with Mike when she was Sophie Eileen, were hurt by something. Hopper's wounds were particularly deeper than Mike's or Jake's.

After a long minute of silence, El decided that he needed to give a little push to make that conversation flow as it should. Without being invasive, using the conjectures she had built when she was trapped in the uncertain world, she turned her attention to Hopper.

"You gave it to me, did not you?" El was not accusing him at all. "It was you who said I was at school with the boys that night, told them I was there."

Hopper nodded, but El did not see it. She was busy remembering the confusion and terror she'd felt when she'd faced Papa that night at school. The fear and despair she'd felt when papa finally caught her.

"It was me, kid." Hopper nodded and sat down next to her. "We needed to save Will's life, kid. You have to understand that ..."

"That Will's life was worth more than mine?" "I understand, really." I, Eleven, was no one important, I, the girl with the shaven head of the lab, just showed up and got worse.

"That's not it, Eleven ..."

But, yes, that was the truth. In 1893, in the context of everything that was going on about Will and her family, she was no one important, not worth enough to have someone fight to defend her from the pope

and the people in the lab. Mike, Dustin, and Lucas fought for her, yes, but what could three skinny preteens do for her? Nothing, the truth was this.

Another truth? Hopper had regretted giving her to the lab, and this could be confirmed by the Eggs and clothes left for her in the woods, and especially by the way he had taken care of her. Hopper was trying to redeem himself for delivering her, but also for allowing his daughter Sarah to die so young. El did not know the story of Sarah, just knew that she had died very young and that her blonde beauty had been imprinted in eternity before she reached puberty.

"El, I like that they call me El." She corrected softly leaning against him. "You left food in the woods for me, did not you? The jackets and the sheets?"

"I was, I do not know, trying to help you, I did not know if you were really alive, but ..."

"Thank you." El interrupted smoothly. "Thanks for everything." And with 'everything' El was referring to both the food and the care he had received over the last few months.

Still keeping distance from the two and everything they talked about, Jake shifted uncomfortably. Jake's movement caught El's attention and reminded her that the matter was not yet over. Susan still had. She had been part of it all, but he did not understand how. Why had she gotten involved and why had she decided to pretend to be her mother?

"Why ... How did I end up in Manhattan?"

Jake grunted softly as he approached the two.

"That part I tell." He ruffled his dark brown hair, something he did when he did not want to sketch what he felt. "Susan was my wife."

El nodded positively, not surprised. Of course Susan and Jake were married, that explained why Jake always visited them and stole Susan's kisses when they thought she was not seeing.

"Well, she was the godmother of Hopper's daughter and was coming

to visit him when she found you lying in the middle of the street. She took you from there and took you to his trailer." Jake looked at anything but El. "The two took you to Manhattan, it was safer there and a much better place for your recovery than this little town you live in."

"You spent two months erased, girl, and this time was enough for Susan to be charmed by you. She could not have children, you see, and you were all she ever wanted. When you awoke with amnesia she saw the opportunity to make you happy and finally have a daughter. I never liked children, but she, she adored children and could not have her own child drive her crazy. She and Hopper would go and tell you everything as soon as you woke up, but ... "

"But would it be too crazy to wake up with amnesia and find out that I am a government experiment? Have I spent my life being a giant laboratory mouse?" El completed in armor remembering the days he had spent confined in the laboratory. "If you're now looking crazy, imagine back then."

Hopper, El felt, did not like the way she was talking to herself. Why was not he liking it? It was the truth. She had spent her entire life being a giant laboratory mouse for pope and his evil companions. To deny the truth was not like her.

And to think she thought Papa liked her for simply liking it. She was so stupid, so dull and blind. Of course Papa did not like her, and on second thought it was clear in the way his icy blue eyes peered at her. El was not special, her powers were special. All that mattered was the powers, how remarkable she could be. She? It did not matter and it would never matter.

"I know you're upset with us and her," Jake began. "I do not care if you're mad at me or the Hopper, but I'll call you if you're mad at her ... "

"I'm not angry." El took a deep breath. Be honest, do not keep what you feel, but do not hurt anyone either. "I'm not mad at her or any of you. I'm ... confused, but I think it's normal."

El was telling the truth (she did not like lies, especially after having

spent her whole life alienated by lies). She was not angry with Jake, Hopper or Susan. Only if she were crazy to feel that way.

Jake was not the kindest of the adults, but he was not no monster or cruel either. He had never been mean to her. Jake always made jokes of bad taste and used all his load of sarcasm when he was about El, but he had never been through it. In fact, it had passed. He had taught El to talk like any teenager of her age and that was enough for her to feel grateful.

Hopper had been more than an uncle to her; he had been a father, the father she had never had and never would have. She did not know if she was ready to tell it or if she would ever be. Hopper had earned respect, gratitude, and even, perhaps, a small portion of El's worship. He had fed her, had taught her about music, how to defend herself from invasive boys. Despite his toughness, Hopper was a good person. He cared for her as if ... She was his Sarah. El was not Sarah, but she would not oppose such a loving treatment.

Susan ... She was a special case. When he had first met Joyce Byers, El had been charmed by Will's wife's love and envy for not having anyone care so much about her. All he wanted was someone who loved her as much as Joyce loved Will and Jonathan. Susan had been that person. She did not have a daughter and El did not have a mother; the perfect match. Susan had taught El about the world, about boys, about how to behave, about music. She had been the mother El had longed for.

"And now?" El asked, staring at the tattoo on his wrist. "Are you going to give me back to the lab?"

"No way. You stay with me." Hopper said hastily. "I have your guard legally. That is, you want to live with me still, right?"

"Of course I want to! No doubt I want!"

El did not hesitate to jump on Hopper, such was the joy he was feeling. She was going to have a family, she, El, Eleven, would have a family.

But El's joy did not last long. Pallidly to those around her, El saw her

world fade momentarily. She knew she was still in the Wheelers' house, but it was kind of hard to believe she was really there when she saw nothing but darkness and horror.

She saw before her a world of destruction. Worse? She was not alone. The monster, the creature about whom Will had spoken earlier was also there. The creature was gigantic, it was like an evil giant spider and it was right there in front of it. The desire for blood was a thousand times greater than that of the demogorgon. He wanted to kill them all.

Her problems had mostly settled, so it was time to get involved in Will's problems and help him with whatever was going on with him and what was about to happen to Hawkins.

20. Running away from home to find out what's going on with Will Byers

Mike rolled his eyes at his friends as well as at Nancy as he paced. He was as curious as they were, but he would not go so far as to heap over the door and fight to hear what was happening to him in the living room just like they did.

She had asked for a moment of privacy and so she would have from Mike. He had even tried to get others to do the same, but he had been completely in vain. Everyone's curiosity was greater than their common sense.

"Are you guys listening to anything?" Max asked with his ear pressed against the door.

"No." Lucas grunted in response. "Maybe she's using her powers to keep us from hearing anything."

Mike smiled at the possibility even though it was completely impossible. El would not use her powers for anything of the sort, she would not exhaust herself.

"Do you think she's going to live in your basement again, Mike?" Dustin, giving up listening to something at the door, questioned himself approaching him.

Wheeler shook his head. No, there was no chance that El would ever live in his basement. It was no longer a secret, she was no longer running from the lab and she definitely did not need Mike's basement anymore as a shelter.

"She has her house Dustin, no longer stay here." He stopped walking and looked at his friend. "That does not mean I'm going to take the fort out of blankets there, okay? The fort will stay there until I want to."

Or when she asks me to get her out of there, Mike mentally

completed.

"But what if ..." Dustin hesitated, his voice gaining intonation that made it clear just how worried he was. "What if they do not want to be with her anymore? What if they give her back to the lab guys."

"They're not going to do it, they're not crazy to do that to her." He answered without hesitation or even stop to think of something different. "Dude, the sheriff likes her, and if he turns her in, she'll invade that shit and bring her back in. But that will not happen, because he will not turn her in."

The two shook their heads in silent agreement. Hopper, despite being a liar, adored El with all the strength he had in that giant body. When the two of them were together, Hopper's chances for a smile increased considerably. He loved El and practically kissed the ground where she stepped.

But that did not exempt him from Mike's anger. Forget the respect he had for Hopper, now all he felt was a bitter feeling of irritation. Of course he was grateful that Hopper loved and cared for El, but that did not soften at all the irritation Mike felt every time he thought Hopper knew all along about El. He knew she was alive and allowed everyone to suffer for a death that had not happened.

Nancy, Lucas, and Max backed away from the basement door with surprising rapidity. Mike and Dustin looked at each other, confused by their friends' shaken reaction, and then exchanged smiles as the basement door opened and understanding filled them.

El, in the company of Hopper and the strange guy with whom Mike did not sympathize with anything, stared at them for a moment. Her brown eyes looked tired, distant from what she saw.

"I ... uh ... we're already leaving." She announced walking down the stairs and standing before the small group. "I have to go home."

"What?" Max stammered, exposing his own perplexity and that of others. "How so?"

El shook his head at Max, his brown eyes shining with a silent plea as

she turned to Nancy and Mike.

"I'm sorry for the mess I made at your house." Nancy and Mike muttered a few words dismissing El's excuses. "I ... uh, Mike ..."

El hugged him tightly, burying his face in the hollow of Mike's neck so that no one could see his face or his rosy lips say to him. Blushing furiously, Mike returned the hug without hesitation.

"Do not sleep early, okay? I know I may sound confused, but ... Please obey me." El stroked his shoulder as he walked away. "See you later."

And with that, El was gone and it was not long before the same thing happened to Lucas, Dustin and Max. Everyone went home.

Still under the effect of El's confused words, Mike spent the rest of the night distracted, not really paying attention to what was going on around him.

Dinnertime, at the Wheelers' house, was as quiet as a funeral. No one but Holly dared to say anything and for that reason alone, no one noticed Mike's distraction or his lack of appetite. The one who normally noticed this was Karen, but tonight she seemed as distracted as he.

"Michael." The boy cringed as Ted Wheeler's voice called out. It was the first time he had spoken directly to Mike since they had had the eldest had asked about his son's sexuality. "You need to eat. You can still build some muscle, be a bit more athletic."

I need ?, Mike mentally questioned his eyes still fixed on the dinner. He was not hungry after seeing Will vomiting a giant green slugs or after helping Nancy clean the blood vomited by El in the bathroom. Besides, Mike had no desire to be athletic. He liked being the way he was and did not want to adjust to the standards his father was imposing.

"I do not want to be athletic." Mike murmured to the puree on the plate.

Ted ignored him.

"Harrington's son, your sister's boyfriend, look at him." He continued as if Mike had not said anything. "A great kid, join the school basketball team ... Why do not you try playing basketball?"

"Because the last time I tried to play basketball I ended up having a dick in the face and a black eye." He sighed in dismay at the conversation. "I was playing alone."

"It was pathetic," Ted said laconically. "But this can be changed. If you start eating right, do daily exercise, get a girlfriend and start walking with the right people ..."

People right? Mike lifted his dark eyes and fixed them on his father, furious with what he had just said. Mike's indignation was shared by Nancy, Holly and Karen.

"Dad ..." Nancy began reproachfully and then stopped before the death glare he received from Ted.

Without saying a single word, preferring his own silence to start a fight, Mike got up from the table, kissed his mother's cheek with a shy 'good evening' and ran into the basement. Living in the same house Ted was becoming stifling.

Mike closed the basement door carefully and threw himself on the thick blanket, tired of Ted's insistence that he change. He lay there, played, until the silence of the environment began to cradle him in a state of drowsiness. El had told him not to sleep early, but ... Maybe she was just tired, as tired as he felt at that moment.

"Mike? Do you hear me? Are you still awake?"

Mike rolled through the blankets and stared into nothingness, his sleepy mind working to understand what had just happened. El's voice ... She had just heard her voice, did she?

Shaking his head in denial, Mike fell back against the blankets of the fort. Of course he had not heard El's voice, that was out of the question. El had left with Hopper and the Manhattan journalist, she was at her house and there was no way she was talking to Mike, much less calling him that time of night.

"I'm going crazy." He mumbled by selecting a blanket and throwing it over him. "It has to be this."

Crazy or not, El's voice echoed through the cellar.

"Mike? Are you there?" A weary sigh was heard. "Please, Mike ..."

"El? You, uh, you calling me?" Mike responded by deciding that by doing so he sounded more stupid than usual. "El?"

"Mike! Oh, thank the angels you're awake. I was beginning to feel like an idiot." El's voice exclaimed through the basement sounding relieved.

Mike looked around, studying the basement for something that would indicate El's presence. Nothing. She was not there.

"El, not to be rude, but how are you talking to me?" He sat up, freckled freckled face.

A charming chuckle (though it sounded tired) echoed through the basement.

"I'm talking at his walkie talkie." She answered with simplicity and a kind of presumption. "I got the signal from your walkie talkie and I'm using it to talk to you."

"That's impressive, El. Are you okay? Did Hopper do anything to hurt you?" Mike questioned looking for the object that El used to communicate with him and smiling to find it. "Did he scream at you? Did that weird guy yell at you? I knew there was something wrong with him, I knew."

Another giggle.

"Jake did not do anything, Mike, but your concern is very sweet." Mike blushed softly, ashamed. "I'm going to Will's house, Mike, I need to know what's going on."

"Of course yes!" He answered without hesitation.

"Meet me at Will's house in half an hour, the boys and Max are

coming too, okay?" Mike nodded as he pulled on a jacket that was lying on the basement floor. "Mike? Thanks for coming with me."

Mike decided to talk before his courage collapsed into a pile of nothing. It had been a long day, which did not exist space for him to speak what was stuck in his throat, but there was a chance and he did not forgive himself if he lost her.

"El? I missed you." He cleared his throat for courage. It was not easy to tell her feelings to a girl, even if she was El. "Thank you for coming back."

"Thanks for waiting, Mike." El's voice returned with such kindness that Mike blushed instantly. "Thank you for believing in me."

And then all that remained was the static of the walkie talkie and the sound of Mike Wheeler's racing heart.

...

Mike hid his bike in one of the many bushes that surrounded the Byers' house and smiled lightly as he found Dustin and Lucas's bikes and Max's skateboard in the nearby bush. They had already arrived.

He stared at the facade of the Byers' house with a little fear. That house had never been the same since Will had disappeared; no one had gossiped this to him, he had noticed by himself. The atmosphere sometimes got heavy, the way Joyce and Jonathan were overprotective with Will, the way Will acted ... Anyway, everything in the Byers house had become strange.

Guided by the sound of the low rumble of his friends' voice, Mike went to the back of the house and found them in a contained argument. Max and Lucas, of course, were the center of every argument.

"What's going on?" Mike surveyed stopping by Dustin.

The curly shrugged, focused on the argument.

"No big deal. The two are being idiots. Nothing new." Dustin adjusted his cap. "Did El tell you what she wanted with Will?"

"Nope. Nothing. She just asked me to come here. That's it. What did she say to you?" Dustin flashed his newly acquired smile in the moonlight, and it confused the brunette. "Why are you smiling like an idiot?"

"Why she did not call me or Lucas, who did it was Max." Dustin's smile, if possible, became wider. "She called you because she likes you. Dude, you're her favorite. El has a super crush on you, man."

With a horrible blush corroding his cheeks, Mike turned his gaze to the forest just in time to see El emerge in the darkness of the night.

She stepped out of the forest and seemed completely oblivious to the fact that a girl her age would be terrified at the mere possibility of walking alone in the middle of the night in a forest as strange as the one surrounding the Byers' house. Surprisingly enough, El already seemed used to walking alone in the middle of the night.

El approached them wearing his usual all star, red flannel shirt and black jeans. The hand, which had been bandaged again, was clinging to the body while the other engaged in pulling off the strange woolen beret she carried on her head. She seemed prepared for a cold Hawkins night and also for any discomfort that might arise.

"Hey, guys." El greeted with a smile.

Her voice sounded different; she was not restrained like old sad Eleven, but she was not as excited as Sophie. Even her smile seemed different.

"What's the problem?" Dustin asked, leaning against the wall. "Why did you call us here?"

"Well, we need to know what's going on with Will, we need to investigate since absolutely no one tells us anything." El tidied his fringe nervously. "Something serious is happening, a few nights ago I heard Hopper, Jake and Mrs. Byers talking about it. It's all connected to Will."

"And why the Hopper does not tell you?"

El pursed his lips, looking irritated. Apparently, Hopper was a tricky subject.

"He does not want me to get involved with anything that's going on." His irritation seemed to subside. "Anyway, if he did not tell me, Will going to tell me."

"He does not know you're here?" Lucas stammered without hiding the perplexity he felt. "Did you run away from the house of the sheriff's house? Did you run away from the house of the guy who commands Hawkins's cops?"

"You did not do the same thing?" El stopped studying the Byers' house and stared at Lucas with arched eyebrows. "Or will you tell me that you warned your parents that you were coming here at Will's house for a casual visit in the middle of the night?"

Mike laughed softly and only stopped when a Lucas beyond outrage gave him a painful sting in his foot.

"We're under Will's room." Max told her friend with a smile of pride on his lips. "Are you going to call him?"

Answering the question of Max, El stood on tiptoe and began giving little beats on the window. A few minutes later, when El had given up knocking on the window and stood beside them, the small group saw the window open and reveal a pale Will Byers inviting them in.

The bad side of running away to the best friend's house in the middle of the night? You cannot enter through the front door, just as you would on an ordinary day. El and Max, with an impressive agility that whetted anyone's curiosity, were the first to jump into Will's room. Lucas, Dustin, and Mike, surprisingly, did not have much trouble either.

Mike was surprised at the state of Will's room. Known for his organization and the zeal he had with his painting materials, Will could not stand that anything in his room was out of place. But judging by the papers, paint, crayons, and crayons scattered on the

floor, there was an exception to everything, even to Will Byers' organization.

"This place is crap, Byers." Max announced without bothering to be gentle.

Will rolled his big green eyes to Max.

"I did not know you were going to get visitors, Max, if I had I would have cleaned it up and made mint tea just to greet you."

"Shut up, Byers." Max growled, furious with the sarcasm directed at her.

Ignoring Max, Mike, as El did, turned his attention to the scribbles that covered the floor of Will's bedroom. Initially everything seemed completely disconnected, meaningless, but then, if you paid close attention, you'd notice there was a pattern. The drawings, when they were not about the same strange creature, intertwined.

Mike took one of the drawings lying on the floor, the one that looked like the most recent one, and looked at it carefully. The creature that starred in the painting was strange, black from feet to head ... Feet ... There were so many legs, or tentacles, that the creature looked more like a giant spider. Of course, counting, the creature did not have the eight legs a spider usually had, but that was the most Mike could do to make the creature a little more understandable.

Still with the drawing in hand, he followed a trail of scrawled papers and gasped as he noted that they were not scribbles but lines that bound together to form long legs, the creature's legs.

"It was you" He heard El whisper and looked at her just in time to see El draw from his jeans pocket a design similar to the one he held. "You left those things ... Those drawings in my closet."

"What do you mean?"

El looked at Mike.

"As soon as I got Hawkins, someone began to make drawings in my closet. Drawings like this and also about the Demogorgon. It also had

designs on the inverted world ... and other things."

"I needed your help," Will replied sitting on the bed. "I needed you to help me. I thought maybe you could remember with the drawings."

El nodded.

"Are you going to tell me everything that's been going on in the last few months? No lies, no hiding from me like you have with your family and the boys?"

Mike shook his head fervently, supporting every word El said. It was time to know the truth, the truth complete and without lies.

For some reason the dark man did not understand, Dustin and Lucas began to look more and more guilty as El spoke about Will telling the truth. It was as if they already knew everything and had told nothing at all. But that was not possible, was it? They told everything to each other.

You did not tell anyone you were dreaming about El every night. You decided to keep your sadness to yourself, did not want to share it with anyone and still think you tell each other everything ?, a small voice whispered inside Mike's head making him feel equally guilty.

Mike heard everything patiently. He heard about how Will had started vomiting the slugs a month after he came back from the inverted world, about his insights with the upside down, about how insights got him out of orbit, taking him back to the inverted world and making him have outbreaks like the one I had had earlier.

"I started having nightmares about it about six months ago, my mom also found out about the things I vomited at the same time, she and Jonathan and Hopper took me to the lab, they examined me and said it was post traumatic stress . " Will toyed with the hem of his T-shirt, unable to face any of his friends. "They medicated me, they said it would pass, it did not pass, it worsened, to speak the truth." He hesitated momentarily. "Sometimes I think slugs are not just in my stomach."

El nodded, urging him to continue.

"Anyway, the monster of my nightmares ... This thing in the drawings" He pointed to the drawing that El and Mike held. "He's real, it's not my madness. I saw him in the inverted world, you saw him, did not you?"

"No. I have nightmares about him, I can feel him sometimes, but I have not seen him. I do not know the inverted world, Will."

Mike, reflecting everyone's reaction, frowned, confused by the response.

"I did not stay in the inverted world for two days, guys. I left there through a small portal that existed in school. I heard you calling me, but when I left ... Well, who was waiting for me was a group of scientists. "

"You did not get stuck there?"

"No, no way." Eleven combed her hair once more. "Can we talk about this later? Like, tomorrow?"

Everyone nodded, anxious to know what was happening, but also not wanting to pressure El. Max, who had never seen Eleven explode in one of his fury attacks, followed his friends' example and swallowed the curiosity he felt.

Something in Mike intimate said he was being a tremendous effort to El staying there with them, talking and acting as if her life had not collapsed. El was making himself strong, but it was just paying enough attention to notice that everything was just a little farce starring her. Her trembling hand, her hairless brown eyes, the wan pallor that stained her features, and the way she tidied her hair every five minutes made the way she felt.

He looked around, hoping the others were also having the same conclusion he had. Nothing, no one but Max, and he seemed to notice it. Lucas, Dustin, and Will turned their concern back toward the monster.

"Anyway," El sighed, stroking his hair one more time. "Have you ever

tried to kill the slugs after you vomit them?"

"No, I just vomit and throw it all down the drain."

El flushed in the light of Will's room lamp when all eyes turned to her. No matter whether it was Sophie or Eleven, one thing did not change: she did not like being the center of attention.

"Have you ever tried to choke or, I do not know, burn this thing?"

Will denied it.

"So ... I think the things you throw up are like cubs of something from the inverted world."

"Cubs?" Mike asked still staring at the drawing, fascinated Will's features. His friend had an undeniable talent. "Those green and slimy little things are cubs?"

"It's just an assumption, it's not a certainty, I'm not an expert on the inverted world, so ..."

El stopped, his brown eyes wide open toward the bedroom door. Mike initially did not understand what was making her so nervous, but then a voice came from the other side of the door. Joyce Byers and there was someone else with her. A thick voice, serious and haughty. Hopper.

Murmuring under his breath, Mike, El, Max, Lucas, Dustin scattered in Will's room, unable to think what they should do in the face of Hopper's emergence. El had run away from home and would take a hell of a scolding if it were found there; so would the others if Hopper and Joyce found them. This could not happen, no one could catch them.

"How come you, with your powers, did not sense that Hopper was here?" Lucas growled at El. "Where are your powers, Eleven?"

"I still do not have complete mastery of my powers. It's still a bit confusing." She hissed in response. "Besides, I was focused on the monster thing ... My head was busy."

They jumped Will's window, one by one. Mike was already outside, almost running toward his bike just as the others did, when he realized that El was not there with them. She had not even jumped the window; She was still inside the room, staring at the door with a guilty look.

"El," Mike called out, trying to catch her attention. "What are you doing? Are not you coming?"

She shook her head, her brown eyes blazing with guilt and a small edge of delight.

"Hopper is here looking for me. He thinks I ran away from home, I ran away from him." She leaned over the bedroom window so she could be closer to Mike. "I'll stay here to talk to him, to, you know, make the bad impression I left."

"Do you think he's going to punish you?"

"I have not the slightest idea." She sighed looking over her shoulder. "Better you go before trouble about it for you."

Mike did not follow El's advice. No. He did not leave. He crouched under the window so that no one would see him and stood there, curious and also fearful that what was about to happen to him. Hopper must be furious with her. Would she scream at her? Leave her punished or something?

Argh, he dared not raise his voice to Eleven. He did not deserve to be yelled at. No one should yell at her.

Crouched in the shadows, Mike heard the creaking of Will's bedroom door and a series of exclamations that muffled the sound of El's voice.

"Hopper, I ..."

"Eleven! Do you know how worried I was? I thought something had happened, you had run away. Are you okay? If you hurt? You scratched?"

Curious, Mike peered inside the room and suppressed a giggle with the scene he found. El was crumpled in a bone-crushing hug by

Hopper. She returned the hug, but it was not as fierce as Hopper had. Guilt was inhibiting her.

"I'm fine, Hopper, I just ... I came to visit Will."

"Jesus, my child, I was worried, I was never so scared, you hungry, you did not eat dinner tonight."

"I'm a bit hungry, but ... I'm really sorry, Hop."

"All right, girl. I'm not angry, okay? Do not have to worry about retaliation."

Hopper, Mike noted with wit and a slight twinge of amusement, did not seem to pay attention to El's words. The man, who by that time had already placed El on the floor, was busy studying every inch of her skin in search of some injury, bruise or anything that indicates any damage.

The Sheriff, Mike thought, acted like a real father acting around his daughter. Ted sometimes acted that way when he was about Holly and Nancy, but he was never as excited or agitated as Hopper.

With the certainty that El would be safe with Hopper and he certainly would not yell at her, Mike crept toward the bike and headed home. The darkness of the night did not shake the joy Mike felt toward El. She was back and now there was someone to watch over her.

21. What the hell I'm?

"And then, El?" Dustin intercepted Eleven the next day as the girl passed the classroom door. "Are you going to tell us or not?"

Mike drummed his pencil against the table, pretending not to notice how pale she was or how her dark circles stood out on that sunny morning. She wore no bows on her head; to tell the truth, even if El bothered to fix her hair. His caramel curls were a mess, a beautiful, mesmerizing disorder that Mike could barely keep his eyes from.

El threw his backpack on the desk next to the Mike and began to stack books on the table, as if he had not heard a word uttered by Dustin. She was visibly upset about something.

"Are you feeling bad?" Mike asked worriedly, examining her with his eyes. "Why did you come to school if you're feeling bad?"

In an awkward motion, El waved his hand dismissing Mike's concern and sank a little into the chair where he sat. She did not show any kind of irritation or sadness, to tell the truth, it seemed that she wanted to fall into a bed and sleep for a long month.

"I didn't sleep very well." She blurted out a yawn. "What do you want to know?"

Mike looked down in embarrassment as Dustin rummaged through his backpack and practically threw it at El, his old, stale notepad. All the questions they had about her were written there; everyone's handwriting and his questions were written there, including his own questions.

God, reading that huge list of questioning, he probably thought they were a bunch of nosy creatures. Or worse, El could think they were pathetic. Mike did not want to look pathetic to El eyes; he could take that kind of judgment from anyone but her.

El studied Dustin's notepad in silence, and after reading all the questions that had been written there, she smiled. It was not a cheerful smile, but it indicated that she was not upset or that she considered them pathetic.

"This is so cute." She mumbled to herself, her index finger caressing the words. "Okay, I don't know how to answer most of these questions, but I'll answer what I can, okay?" Everyone nodded. "Where can I start?"

"Let's go to question number one, the one that pulls the whole thread of the skein:" Lucas said leaning dangerously on the edge of his desk. "Did you grow up in the lab?"

The girl stared at him in disbelief.

"I think it's kind of obvious, Lucas, but, yes, I grew up in Hawkins's lab, I don't remember getting out of there before last year." She lowered her voice so no unwanted person could hear her. "I don't know who my father or biological mother is. I have spent my whole life believing that Brenner was my father. I also don't know what they did to me so that I'm what I'm now."

Hearing El talking about his biological mother made Mike remember the catatonic woman his mother had come to visit. Terry. The catatonic woman and El had the same brown eyes and the same delicate chin. She could not be El's biological mother, could she?

"What happened after you killed the demogorgon?" Lucas asked looking anxious. "You said you did not get stuck there, did you?"

"Yeah, I got out of there almost on the same day, I woke up with someone yelling for me." She looked at him meaningfully, saying with her eyes that she had heard him. "I followed the voice and ended up finding a small portal that allowed me to get out of there."

"Why did not you look for the boys?" Max searched elbowing Lucas and Dustin for space. "Why did not you come back?"

"I tried, but ... They found me and took me back to the lab." She sighed wearily. "I ran away again, hid in the woods for a while, did it

until Susan found me."

"She taught you to speak." Dustin deduced, making her laugh with sadness.

"I was taught to speak, read, and write in the laboratory. I needed to know these things to be useful for their plans." She smiled at the same time, smug and dreamy. "To irritate the scientists who accompanied Brenner, I refused to say anything beyond 'yes' or 'no.' After a while I got used to simple answers."

El hesitated, and that made way for Mike's imagination to create wings. He began to imagine El, running through the forests of Hawkins. El, hungry and cold, hiding from the scientists in the lab. El was all alone in the darkness of the night while he and the others were in their homes. It was not his fault that all this had happened to him, but Mike somehow found a way to feel guilty.

Lucas, Dustin, and Max were content to know this part of the story, but Mike ... with him the same thing did not happen. He did not forget Jim Hopper's involvement in it all, and the first time he saw himself alone with El (in the last period of classes, during literature class), he questioned this.

"What about Sheriff Hopper? What's his connection to all this?" This was a question that tormented him that he could not pass up.

He shot the book of literature, unable to conceal the suspicions and the rage that gnawed at his insides.

"You want the truth, is not it? Remorse. Remorse is that it moves." El approached him. "Hopper is trying to redeem himself from everything he has done since his daughter died. He kind of feels guilty about what happened to Sarah and me too."

"What exactly is he trying to redeem himself for?" Mike asked. "What did he do?"

"Too many things, Mike."

A range of scenes crossed Mike's mind, all of which were impossible and also horrible.

"That night." He hesitated, as if he was not sure what he was about to do. "No one knew we were in school, do you think he ..."

El stared at him with something like pity. She almost seemed to know what was going on inside his mind, the questions and the confusion that haunted him.

"He delivered me? I do not need to answer, you know the answer."

Mike swallowed, never before so sad to discover that he had been right about something. He had been suspicious of Hopper from the start (even desperate to have Will back, Joyce would never hand over El's location), but he had refused to guess that Jim Hopper had been the traitor, the person who had destroyed everything that night.

El grabbed his hand under the table and it made him jump in place. He had never taken a girl's hand other than Holly or Nancy and El's hand was definitely not like his sisters' hand. Her touch was soft and warm, reassuring despite the scars that existed there.

"You also know he's been taking care of me for the last couple of months. He, Susan and Jake took care of me. Mike, if they wanted to hurt me, I would know and I assure you I would have stumbled upon that house, Mike. "

"You may be right, but that does not mean that..." That I can forgive you for giving you away because he hid you in the last few months. He shook his head. It was not time to complicate matters. "If Hopper does anything that could hurt you, you will not hide it, will you? Will you tell us what it is?"

El smiled. It was the most beautiful smile Mike had ever seen in his life.

"I promise. I promise I'll tell you." She played with his hand. "I promise not to go away again."

Mike almost did not believe when, at the end of the literature class, El announced that he could not go out with him and the boys because he had to go to the police station to talk to Jim Hopper.

"He wants to talk to me, you know?" She lowered her voice as a group of noisy students passed by. "About everything that happened yesterday, Jake said there are still things to be cleared up, do you have something checked in? I'd really like you to come with me."

Mike, who had to study for a biology test that would happen the next day, shook himself at the invitation and the possibility of spending the afternoon on El's side, and practically yelled a "yes" in her face.

"Right," El said, clearly holding back a laugh. "Jake come get me, you come with us?"

"I'd rather go on a bike, El." He looked back, feeling the worst person in the world. Mike wanted to be close to El, but as much as El insisted that this Jacob was a good person, he could not sympathize with the guy.

"If you like it that way." She stood on tiptoe and surprised him with a long kiss on the cheek. "I'll stay in front of the police station, waiting for you."

His face flushed and struggling to curb the smile on his lips, Mike wheeled toward Hawkins's station. Of course he had no hope of getting there before El, but he could not contain a grimace of displeasure when he found her outside the police station in the company of this Jacob Wayfarer.

As soon as she saw him, El, who had been having a busy conversation with Jacob, pointed to a place where Mike could keep his bike and towed it into the police station. Jacob followed them closely and Mike did not have to look back to know the man was glaring at him. Apparently the dislike Mike felt for him was reciprocal.

Mike, in his thirteen years of life, had never been in Hawkins's station, and now that he was there he could not help but wonder. The police station was a common place, the walls were painted with sober colors and the ambience decorated with old furniture. All common.

"Sophie, Jacob, and ..." A crinkly smiley lady welcomed them and gasped as she noticed Mike's presence. "You're Karen Wheeler's boy, right? Jesus, how did you grow up, kid? You have your mother's eyes. What are you doing here? Has something happened to your mother?"

Mike shook his head in embarrassment.

"He's with me, Floo." El answered for Mike. "It's okay at his place, I guess."

The wrinkled-faced lady, Floo, nodded. She had a funny expression on her face, as if she knew something that Mike and El still did not know, but that they would soon find out.

"Hopper's in his room, honey. You can come in."

And the two entered. Hopper's room had been decorated to match the decor of the police station, but there was something there that made Mike uncomfortable. Maybe it was the imposing presence of Jim Hopper, maybe it was the look of death that he shot toward Mike as soon as he saw the boy; whatever it was, made him uncomfortable, wanting to run away from there.

But he would not pay attention to that childlike gain. Hopper was no soul-devouring monster; he was a man ten times the size of Mike. That would not stop Mike from being close to El, not really.

"Hey, Hopper." El greeted himself by throwing himself on an old couch that was in the corner of the room and indicating, with his eyes, that Mike would do the same. He obeyed without hesitation. "Mike came with me, do you mind?"

Hopper, despite carrying a frown on his face that made Mike's interior freeze with fear, said he did not care at all about his presence.

Suddenly, surprising the two teenagers, he began to pile up and organize before him a few papers. Every now and then he would whisper some curses in a hushed voice and then concentrate on what he was doing.

"Not wanting to be rude, but probably already being." He cleared his throat after a brief exchange of glances with Mike. She was impatient. "Why did you ask me to come here?"

Hopper adjusted the few papers one last time, separated a letter to knead and threw it to the ground and then, at last, understood everything that had left in the direction of El, ignoring or exerting to the maximum to ignore the way the girl tilted against Mike. He seemed to be making a tremendous effort to be tolerant of the two teenagers.

"What's this?" El asked, his voice filled with anticipation.

"You need to read to know." Hopper seemed to be suffering from a horrible headache. "The kid ... Michael, can help you with whatever trouble you have.

Hopper left the room and left them alone.

"I'll help you, okay?" Mike promised to try and reassure me at any cost. "I'll help you with whatever you need."

El did not answer, just stood there, staring at the few papers. Blushing madly, Mike leaned a little against El to then peer at what she was reading, what those roles were.

Terry Ives Processes Hawkins National Water and Light Laboratory

Frowning, curious and at the same time confused, Mike continued to read what was clearly an old, dull clipping from one of the newspapers circulating in Hawkins.

THEREZA IVES, at twenty-seven, processes the Hawkins National Water and Light Laboratory. She claims Martin Brenner, the laboratory's CEO, has kidnapped her seven-and-a-half-month-old

daughter.

Jane Ives, Terry's daughter, never existed. The child who was allegedly abducted and who, for the worship of conspiracy theorists, had "powers", was never admitted to any hospital or registered in a notary's office. There are no records of Jane Ives because she never existed. The only record that exists is that of Terry Ives entering a small hospital late on the night of December 10, 1971. That same evening, during the third trimester of her pregnancy, Terry Ives had a miscarriage and lost her child.

In this way, ending this matter, Jane Ives was never kidnapped by anyone, Terry makes accusations based on the insanity of her daughter's abortion, and finally, Martin Brenner is...

The sheet was changed; El had already finished reading the first one and had moved on to the next role left by Hopper. This time it was not a newspaper clipping; it seemed to be some kind of civil registry. The birth record of Jane Ives, the girl the newspaper claimed did not exist.

Name: *Jane Elouise Ives*

Father: *unknown*

Mother: *Thereza Elizabeth Ives*

Below, making the paper even stranger and giving it an air of excessive formality, there was a sequence of information.

Born at 3:30 am on December 11, 1971, Jane enjoys full health, despite the risky circumstances of her life and the life of her mother.

Should remain in the incubator for a month or more, this complete until nine months and is strong enough to live with the mother and therefore

with other children.

Jane, Jane, Jane ... Who was Jane? Who was Terry Ives? A light illuminated Mike's mind and he immediately highly remembered the catatonic woman. Her name was Terry, and apparently she had a daughter named Jane.

El, who continued reading the paper, gasped loudly.

"Mike," She called, motioning for him to continue reading.

Jane (011) has passable physical characteristics this is evidenced now that she is four and a half months old. Brown eyes, dark brown hair, free face of any kind of mackerel or imperfection. In his belly, on the left side and just above the navel, there is an unusual birthmark; a star. Apparently it is common in the family of Terry Ives to have a birthmark ...

His eyes widened, Mike received the papers El had thrown over him and watched her lift the hem of his shirt.

"El, what do you ...?" Mike fell silent at the sight of El's pale belly and the four-pointed star that existed there.

El ran his finger over the little star that was just above her belly button, looked amazed and shocked. Mike could not blame her or say he understood her; he could just stand there, waiting for her to react.

"Jane Ives. I'm Jane Ives." She lowered the hem of her blouse. "Why is Hopper telling me this? Why do I need to know that?"

Mike nodded and motioned for them to continue reading the papers.

I, Rebecca Evangeline Ives, legal guardian for Jane Ives, my niece, hereby pass on the guardianship of Jane to James Hopper.

"What...?" El looked questioningly at Mike, his face pale and his eyes dark. She looked ashamed of something. "I do not understand a word of what is written here. Can you ...?"

"Hopper adopted you. I mean, he did not really adopt you, but that's almost it."

She let out a low squeaky noise so low that for a moment Mike thought it had been his head.

"What ... Why is he giving me this? Why do I need to know if he adopted me?" She asked softly.

"I think Sheriff is trying to tell you that there are no more lies around you. No one else is fooling you." He responded trying to comfort her. "He's trying to be honest."

"If he's trying to be honest," El prolonged the syllables of the last word, his eyes fixed on the paper bump that Hopper had discarded under the desk as he left the room. "Why did he hide that letter?"

"He hid it? PFF! He did not hide it." Mike forced a laugh that would not fool even Holly, who will say El. "It must be his job, Sheriff's thing, forget it, forget it, it's silly."

El ignored him, his eyes locked on the paper ball. It was fast and surreal. The ball began to shake madly, as if convulsing, and then flew to El's outstretched hand. It would have been magical if her nose had not been bleeding.

Hopper,

I do not want this girl in my house. This child only brought disgrace to me and my sister. From what she told me, she was raised in the laboratory, was raised by Martin Brenner, and this proves how corrupt she already is. Being raised by Brenner has destroyed any chance of her being a normal girl, which will tell an Ives.

You did not write it in your letter and you did not have to do it: I know everything. I know she killed people (and if she did not kill she'll kill soon, I can assure you), either to defend herself or to attack those who hurt her. I know about her powers, I know how inconstant an Ives might be, and I know, too, that the joining of these powers with her inconstancy could make her a dangerous child.

I'm building a life for myself, Hopper, and I do not want this girl in my life; no more. She was raised and trained to be a little psychopath and in my life there is no room for her. Enough of oddities. Enough of letting the name "Jane" continue ruling my life. This little psychopath is not welcome in my house, in my new life.

She is all yours. You can either adopt it or return it to Brenner; do whatever you want. I do not want this freak of nature.

I am curious about her, but my curiosity does not overcome my aversion. She ruined my life, Hopper. I had a bright future, my sister and I had, but then this little girl came and spoiled everything. This little psycho ...

Mike took the letter from El's hands and kneaded it with as much brutality as he could and threw it to the floor. Freak of nature? Little psychopath? Abnormal? Who this damned woman was thought to be talking about these things of El? El was not any of that. Not one of those words matched reality.

"This woman is crazy, El. She's crazy." Mike said without trying to control his tone. "She does not know you, she cannot say these things without knowing you."

"But she's right, Mike." El sniffed softly. "I killed people, I really am a fickle little psycho ..."

Not able to hear El speak that way about herself, feeling hurt by having read those words about El, Mike pulled her and pressed her against him.

"You're not a psychopath, El." Mike shouted. "She's completely wrong about everything she said. You're nothing like that."

"And what the hell am I?" She buried her face against his chest.

"What am I, Mike? If I'm not normal like you, the guys and Maxie, what am I?"

He pressed her against him, wanting to help her. Mike just wanted El to stop crying, to mourn for a clueless woman who had written horrible things about her.

"You are special." He patted her shoulder. "You're the girl we met in the woods, the girl who saved my life, the girl who saved my best friend's life." He breathed in her scent. El smelled of tears, blood and roses. "You're the girl I've been looking for for a year, which I thought was alive."

"You wasted your time believing a psychopath was alive." She grunted tearfully. "Congratulations, Mike Wheeler!"

Mike did not hesitate.

"You're not a psychopath, far from it." In an act of bravery, encouraged by the thought of cherishing El, Mike kissed the top of her head just as he did Holly when the girl was upset about something. "You're wonderful, you're the best thing that ever happened to Hawkins."

"So why did she not like me?"

"Because she's a fool. She's still going to crawl at your feet, El, I assure you." Other Kiss. "This woman will still see the wonderful person who is missing and will chase after you."

When Hopper came back into his room and found Mike and El in his arms, he did not scowl or grumble; he just stared at them in silence.

22. She then went back to her personal hell on behalf of her friend

He played with the little ball of paper that a few hours ago had been the devastating letter from Rebeca Ives, the ball she'd taken as soon as Mike had gone to her house. She was no longer upset at the words of aversion she had read; she did not feel anything but a feeling of emptiness. All she felt was a huge emptiness.

She tossed the ball under the bed as an insistent knock on the bedroom door drew her back to reality. She lifted her head to see a cautious Jim Hopper sneak in.

"You did not say a word all through dinner." He said as he pulled a chair to sit on the side of her bed. "He barely touched his food and did not comment on how ridiculous Jacob was with his mouth mingled with white sauce."

They shared a faint laugh with the memory of Jacob Wayfarer, the great Manhattan journalist, completely smudged with pesto sauce. On an ordinary day El would have laughed and mocked him until he got tired, but the fact was that she was not feeling very ready.

"I do not want to be an Ives. I do not want to meet Terry or Becky Ives." El said suddenly hugging the pillow. "I want to stay in Hawkins, with you and my friends. Whether I'm Sophie, Jane or Eleven, here's my place. "

She winced a little as Hopper's blue eyes scrutinized her. He felt guilty for leaving Becky Ives's letter in a visible place, for allowing El to read the bitter woman's words.

"If that's how you want it, that's how it will be." He shifted uncomfortably, the chair was too small for his size. "But if you change your mind about not knowing your mother and your aunt, you can tell me."

"I will not change my mind." She assured him inflexibly, with no

trace of doubt in her voice. "I've made up my mind."

El wanted to meet her mother, she really wanted to meet the woman (or what was left of it) who had given his life. However, meeting Terry Ives demanded to meet Becky and El definitely did not want to meet the bitter woman in the letter. She had already been rejected by letter and did not want to repeat the dose in person, not at all.

All his life El had been rejected and used, but that had never shaken her; the rejection had not shaken her until last year when she had been introduced to the real world and noticed how dislocated and different she was. To be rejected was bad, to say that she was rejected by someone who was the blood of her blood.

The four-pointed star on her belly made it clear that she was an Ives, but Becky refused to accept it and he would not insist on it. El had a family and did not need the love of Becky Ives to be happy. Did not Becky want to meet her? Her to go to hell, but that did not come looking for it later.

El reached for Hopper, silently asking him to hold her. It was a childish, even pathetic act, perhaps, but she could not restrain herself. To El's relief, Hopper promptly took her in his arms and he did so with astonishing ease.

"Hop" El called him with a strand of voice. "Can you stay here with me tonight? I know I may be looking pathetic for this, but ..."

Hopper said nothing, only found a way to fit El and himself in the girl's little bed.

El would not admit it so soon, but the truth is she was hopeful that the presence of the great and imposing Jim Hopper would help him to have a good night's sleep. It was silly, very silly on her part, but she thought maybe with Hopper there, on her side, the nightmares would finally go away. Jim Hopper could scare away the nightmares that tormented her through the night.

She had barely closed her eyes when images of the upside down had exploded and stained her dreams.

Everything around her was rotten and decadent. There was no remnant of sunlight or lunar, the order of the time was darkness and darkness.

Having learned in the worst way that being on the move was always a good way to warm up and not be an easy target in the sight of a probable enemy, El hugged himself and took a few steps. She was in the woods, at a specific waiting point in the woods: the edge that surrounded the Byers' house. It was not long before he found the decaying Byers Castle.

Frightened by a noise and having detected the energy of a terrified person, she looked around and gasped at what she saw. Will Byers, his face wet with tears and a few bruises, was running toward her. And then, as if something were holding him back, he fell to the ground, his body motionless.

He tried to approach and then screamed when his approach was also intercepted by something. He looked down and, with absolute terror, saw something goose catch at her feet. He tried to kick the thing away, but he got no result other than the squeeze of a tortuous grip on his ankles.

Gathering all the strength he had, he screamed as loudly as he could and the thing literally exploded at his feet. Shambling, El advanced to close to Will, to help his friend. Will was still lying on the ground, with one difference: the thing pinned to the ankles them El surrounded his body. He was immobilized, completely still and unable.

"Will" whispered falling beside him. "I'm really sorry for that."

Will's green eyes flashed in the darkness of the upside down, calling for help.

Hopper was there when El awoke crying, trembling with fear. Hopper was also there the following nights, when everything was repeated with perfect horror. He continued on El's side, even as the girl could no longer nail her eyes, afraid that the darkness would invade her dreams again.

The sleepless nights soon began to take effect. Dark and large dark eyes made themselves visible, the skin lost its color and its natural flush, El's eyes lost their brilliance and the girl's indisposition became more and more evident. After nearly falling asleep during gym class during his third sleepless day, El, Jacob and Hopper came to the consensus that it would be best not to go to school until it was all settled.

The decision made the house where they live became agitated with the constant enters and leaves of hormonal adolescents. No sooner had class time ended and Mike, Max, Lucas and Dustin were at the door of El's house, asking if she was better or if they could see her. El was never better and she would soon discover that she was not the only one to feel that way.

"How's Will?" El asked, resting his head on Mike's shoulder. This was a comfortable position and did not seem to bother the brunette.

The quick exchange of glances and the flood of pessimistic thoughts sufficed to answer El's question.

"Bad" Dustin said. He was busy evaluating, poking and grimacing at the few objects on the white vanity of El's room. "To tell you the truth, Will has not gone to school or given a sign of life in the last days.

What is it? It seems dangerous. "

Eyes heavy with sleep, but with the inside trembling with fear, El looked at Dustin through his half-closed eyes.

"It's an eyeliner, Dustin, and although I've never worn it, I do not think it's dangerous at all. Susan would never give me anything dangerous, is it still about the slugs he vomits? "

"Before that was all." Lucas laughed scornfully, studying the small pile of El's books. "He's had horrible headaches, he has not slept anything like you, his mother took him to the lab."

"For the lab?" Blinked stirring beside Mike. "Why?"

"I do not know, he walks incommunicado, his mother says nothing

and Jonathan walks so tightly on Mike's sister that it's impossible to ask." Lucas flipped through one of El's books and frowned. "Why are some words underlined? Do not you know it's a sin to scratch a book?"

El shook his head at him, too tired to formulate an answer or even say anything. She just stood there, on Mike's side, being comforted by his presence.

The room was silent for a few seconds, a silence filled with unrestrained apprehension. Everyone was worried about her and Will; they wanted to do something to help, but nothing they could do because they did not know what they were dealing with or what was happening.

"I've had nightmares with Will." El confided to more snuggling close to Mike. It was the first time she'd said it aloud. "Every night, without exception, as soon as I close my eyes I see him in the inverted world."

Mike's breathing became agitated and his concern more accentuated.

"Arrested?" Mike swallowed. "How so trapped?"

"It's as if someone or something is holding him there, preventing him from leaving." Traced the 011 carrying the already free of bandages wrist. "The thing in my nightmares holds him there."

"But Will is here, he's in the lab." Max argued wrapping the red hairs in a messy bun. "He is safe, out of danger."

"But what if he is not." Reluctant, most reluctant, El pulled away from Mike and looked at his friends. "It may be madness of mine, maybe I'm delirious after three sleepless nights, but ..."

"Do you think something is still holding Will there?" Lucas questioned. "That's crazy, Eleven. Completely impossible."

"Look at me, Lucas, my existence is impossible and here I am." She rocked her legs back and forth, discouraged. "It's just a theory, Lucas. Forget it. "

"I will not forget anything, Eleven. You get ..."

The unmistakable sound of a door slamming shut behind the house silenced Lucas's words. Soon after, the voice of a tired Jim Hopper came up followed by Joyce Byers' loud, hopeless voice. Their words sounded indistinct, blurred, as if they were underwater.

Hesitating, El closed his eyes and wished ardently to hear everything that went on between Hopper and Joyce. El was not normally governed by her curiosity, but this time, in the face of the excitement of the two adults in the living room, she got the better of it.

"... Are you aware of what you're asking me, Joyce?" Hopper's voice began to echo with a static as background. "You know I cannot afford it."

They all looked at each other in confusion. El merely merely pointed to Lucas's backpack, to the walkie talkie he used to convey Hopper's and Joyce's conversation.

"You ... are you doing this?" Max widened his blue eyes toward El. "That's ..."

El shook his head at her friend, asking her to shut up and trying to make it clear that she herself could not say anything. If she spoke, anything, the connection created with so much sacrifice would be closed.

"Please, Hopper. You know what it is to lose a child, you know what's happening to me right now." Joyce Byers cried. "You cannot let my baby die."

"I did everything that was within my reach, Joyce?" Hopper replied. "Now, I do not understand why we have to engage Eleven in all this."

"I don't understand either, Jim, but my Will says she can help."

"She's only twelve, Joyce, and not sleep the next few days will be as sick as your child. The girl is wasting away, Joyce, what the hell could she help? It needs to be helped and not help."

"He just wants to talk to her, that's all. He says he tried to talk to her, but ... she does not respond ..."

El gasped loudly when an astonishing nothingness of headache seized her. For a brief five seconds the world became an indistinct blur and then returned to normal.

She was partially aware of his friends' speculations, their loud voices, and their exclamations of wonder and astonishment at what they had just witnessed, but right now the only thing holding her attention was the harrowing headache that plagued her. That pain was not normal. El had done something like that before, and he could tell with certainty that the pain was not normal.

"El" Mike held her as she fell to the side, over him. "Your nose ..."

Her nose was the last thing that mattered at the moment. Her head was bursting like the day she discovered she was Eleven and not Sophie Eileen and there was still the problem with Will. Joyce had said he had been trying to talk to her, but Will had done absolutely nothing; he had not phoned her or anything.

The only thing related to Will Byers that had happened in the last ones about El had been the dreams, but it was impossible that he had tried to communicate with her through dreams. Completely impossible.

She took one look at Mike's pale, worried face and knew it was not completely impossible. She had already unconsciously communicated with Mike through dreams and maybe Will was trying to do the same in the last few days. Perhaps the nightmares were not visions but calls for help from Will Byers.

Mike was gently helping her wipe the blood from her nose when the bedroom door opened with a smash. Speculation ceased, and all eyes turned on the upset Jim Hopper and the tormented Joyce Byers. Jim Hopper did not seem to like the closeness between Mike and El.

"What is happening?" The man asked. "El?"

El shook his head at him while Mike, even frightened, did not pull away or stop helping her. Mike was resigned not to be moved by Hopper.

"It's nothing." She met Joyce's eyes. "Hi, Mrs. Byers, you want to talk to me, right?"

Will's mother looked puzzled.

"How do you ...?" Hopper rested a hand on her shoulder. "Oh, yeah, baby."

Joyce knelt before her and stroked her face with trembling hands. The woman was visibly upset about what was happening to her son.

"You know what's going on with my son, do not you? Honey, he's got worse in the last few days, I had to get him to the lab ..." Joyce's voice faltered and this, added to the woman's apprehensive feelings, shattered the heart of El. "No one in the hospital would understand what is happening to him, they would call him aberration ..."

Moved by Joyce's emotions (there was something about Joyce's unconditional love for Will that softened El's heart and made her wonder what would become of her if the lab had not stolen her from her mother), El took the woman's hands and looked at her in the depths of her eyes with the greatest amount she could muster.

She wanted to help Joyce, El really wanted to, but how could she do it? How could she help Will?

"You want me to go see him." El said quietly. "If that's it, I will."

"Honey, he's in the lab." Joyce's large eyes became dizzy. "Only the people there could help him."

Hard as it was to admit, El knew Joyce was right about that. The Lab idiots always knew what to do and how to act in the face of things like the one happening to Will. It was their duty to know how to deal with it; they, forcing El and other children to do certain things, had created all that shit and they had to find a solution or at least try to soften it.

Knowing this did not diminish her anger and her fear of everything that came from the lab and everyone who worked there. She would never forget everything they had done to her, never forgive everything they were forced to do, she would never, never forgive

what they had made her. She hated the lab and feared it at the same time. She did not want to go back to that damn place.

Glancing briefly at Mike and another toward the other friends, El made the decision that needed to be made. She was not the focus at that moment; Will was. Will needed help, and even though he did not know how to help, El would try to do it.

"I go" El determined.

"El, you're sick, do not come sleeping or eating well, and I do not think going to the lab will help in your state of mind and health." Hopper tried to argue. "You do not have to go to that place."

She smiled good-naturedly at Hopper, charmed by the concern he was sketching toward her. Besides Mike and Susan, no one had ever cared so intensely about her.

"No problem, I just have to change clothes and we ..." She tried to get up and let out an annoyed sigh as everything around her turned and she found herself falling on the bed. "Maybe I need a little help before we go to the lab."

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Will be all right. It's gonna be okay. I'm not doing anything too much. No one here can hurt me... Repeating this mantra mentally, El lifted his head and followed steadily through the far set of corridors that formed the large complex that was the laboratory.

El noticed with a sneer that the place was different, the decor had been changed. The white tiles that had once covered the walls had been replaced with green tiles so clear that it hurt to look. They had tried to change the place, to give a more inviting air, a "pity" that all this effort had been in vain. The laboratory still looked like a large morgue and very well-groomed.

"I hate this place" confided to Hopper and Joyce. She wanted Mike,

Max, Lucas or Dustin to be there, but the two adults had shooed them away, saying their entry would not be allowed. "I hate."

No one answered and it made her miss her friends. They always responded. Max would probably have told her to put that fucking place down (she could be very aggressive in her deeds and her words), Mike would have reassured her and would try to distract her with anything, Lucas would have been rational and would ask why she it was there that he hated the place so much and Dustin would have said something funny.

They followed the corridors and only stopped when a scientist intercepted them. He was a smiling man, but his eyes were cold.

"Mrs. Byers, Sheriff Hopper." The man smiled as he looked at El. "Eleven, it's good to see you."

El smoothed her flowery blue dress she wore while deliberately ignoring the man's outstretched hand.

"I cannot say the same." She leaned against Hopper.

The man blinked at her, the coldness in his gaze momentarily replaced by shock. It was the first time in years that someone in the laboratory had heard El utter a complete sentence.

"Mrs. Byers, your son is awake. You can say he has improved significantly." The man said turning to Will's mother. "The three of you will enter ..."

"Only I'm going in," he said, then turned to Hopper for support. "Could it be, Hop?"

Faced with a reluctant nod from Jim Hopper and screaming for help if something strange happened, El entered the room where Will Byers had been kept.

"Hi, El." Will Byers's weak voice greeted her.

Looking pale as a ghost, Will was lying in a long hospital bed. There was a bucket beside his bed.

"You wanted to talk to me?" Will nodded and motioned for her to approach. "Will, do you know what's happening to you?"

She crawled close to him reluctantly. There was something about his energy, something that made her sick. She would not have approached of her own accord, not at all, but at the same time that something propelled her away from him, something attracted her like a magnet.

For a moment it seemed that Will had not heard her; he just stood there, staring at her with his big, glazed eyes. Finally, when El was already thinking of calling Hopper and asking them to leave, Will reacted.

"I need your help."

"Will, I can't do anything ..."

"I just need your help, that's all." He looked at her seriously. "I need you to help me face this, get it out of my head." He coughed noisily and smiled as El tried to pull away, alarmed at the possibility of him vomiting on her one of those disgusting green things. "They took all of my belly, you know. I'm free of those things. They literally opened me and took everything I should not be here."

Will lifted his T-shirt so that El saw the long, pink scar that lay there. It was horrible, but she had definitely seen some disgusting things.

"There's something in my head, El." He went on. "It's not one of those green things, it's worse. Please help me get it out of me." They tried, but ... I think only you can help me with that.

Feeling dizzy, needing support, El sat on the tip of bed Will and ... waited. She simply waited for him to give a signal or to say what should be done, what to do next. Anything. Will did not say anything.

Allowing her instincts to dominate her, for every action of her to be driven by the power she was constantly trying to control and that often failed, El took Will's hand. With her eyes closed and momentarily forgetting the world around her, El connected to Will, and though she was not brought up in religious molds, she prayed to

heaven that she could help Will.

"Will" called fearfully. Within her mind had come a sudden, unpleasant set of negative possibilities. And if it did not work out, and if Mike hated her for it, he could not help Will, and if ...? "Do you trust me? Did you really believe that I can help you?"

Will's hand, cold as ice just out of the refrigerator, squeezed her hand with a kindness almost as big as Mike's.

"It's going to be all right." A pause. "I trust you, Eleven."

Buoyed by Will Byers' confidence, El concentrated again. She needed to help Will, she was going to help Will. He needed her, he was a good person, and if she was going to a destination and a better life, free from the ghosts of the past, why could not that happen to Will Byers?

Panting so loudly that it attracted the attention of those outside the room, El went inside Will Byers's head to save him from the remnants of the inverted world. She was going to save him, she had to save him from whatever was tormenting the green-eyed boy he had grown up with Mike Wheeler.

23. The rejected Ives tries to save the Byers from his mental and corporal hell

El blinked, stunned with the darkness that was Will Byers' mind. She had never been inside someone's head so literally and real, but something inside her said that a person's mind should not be so dark and empty.

Controlling her breathing, controlling the insecurity that could put everything to a loss, she glanced around for something to help her stand. Anything. Only darkness and cold. It was as if she were in the void, in the place where she would usually stop when she completely disconnected from the world with a single goal in mind.

But that was not the void; it was Will Byers' mind and he was somewhere in the middle of that darkness.

"WILL?" El screamed and shuddered as his voice echoed with no response through the darkness. "WILL? BYERS?"

No answer. Jesus, in shit I got myself into ?, thought.

"Will?" She hugged herself. "Please, Will, I can't help you if you do not let me. Stop hiding."

Standing in the dark darkness that was Will Byers's mind, frightened by what might happen, El wished Hopper was there to protect her, wished Mike was there to comfort her and distract her with his freckles. Shaking her head, she distanced herself from those desires. Hopper and Mike could do nothing to help her.

"William Byers." El shouted into the void. She was not accustomed to giving orders or to sound so bossy, but governed by the hope that that made his friend talk, there she was doing that. "Come immediately or I swear I'll leave."

Hoping that Will (or whatever was inside his head) did not hear the tremor in his voice, El crossed his arms over his chest and waited. But

what the hell was she waiting for? That Will would talk to her? That he ...?

After seconds that seemed like hours, El decided it was time to give up, to return to the real world. Demonstrating a timing of perfect response, Will finally demonstrated. His voice sounded distant, faint and distorted, but it was definitely him. He was calling her, he was ... He was asking for help.

"Will?" She called, then horrified as the boy's voice rose to a scream. "Will, please, say something, anything that can make me find you."

Will's voice, sounding fainter than the last time, began to chant a song well known to him. Although it sounded melancholy and contained in itself no trace of its noisy melody, it was clearly Should I Stay or Should I Go. He adored that song, and after everything that had happened to Will last year, he believed he was not doing the same thing anymore.

Guided by the sound of the sad and not soothing music of Will Byers, she found herself advancing slowly in the darkness. He walked for long minutes just stopping to stumble into something of medium height.

Perplexed, El stared at the thing in which she had stumbled. Will Byers, his green eyes shining in the darkness of his mind, stared at her with despair. He was literally pinned to the ground. similar slimy things with vines bound him to the ground and almost completely covering his mouth.

"Hey, El."

"Jesus! Will!" El fell kneeling before his friend's body, the restless hands searching for a way to ward off those things from him. "What ... How ... Do you know what's going on?"

"You can't let me go. He put me here, only he can get me out of here."

Thinking better to ignore Will's pessimism, El raised his hand and wished, ordered, that those gooey things loosen him. Surprisingly,

there was resistance from the goofy things. It was as if they did not want to be destroyed, as if they had a life of their own.

El intensified the order gooey thing and smiled surprisingly tired, when the ominous sound of something wet fading echoed with emptiness. Will was free of the thing that bound him.

"There you go!" She helped Will sit down. "Will? What's the problem?"

With a trembling hand Will pointed to a point beyond the two. El followed Will's direction and realized, with unrestrained feeling of horror, that the darkness had given way to a blue gloom. Now she could see the sea of creepy vines filling Will's mind. It was as if she were back in the inverted world.

Hesitantly, El touched one of the vines and walked away with a squeal of disgust. That was alive, there was a pulse going through that thing and giving it life. There was blood circulating in it. It was as if the demogorgon had been killed, but somehow it had left its mark on Will Byers. It was not enough to have filled the boy with those green things ...

El shouted loudly when the supposed vine, like a slug or giant snake, moved under her foot. It seemed to be the evolved form of things that scientists had taken from Will's stomach, an evolved and far more advanced form of the green things he had managed to reach into young Byers's mind.

"What's all this?"

"I think it's a great Demogorgon cub." Will laughed sadly. "I am the host of a giant demogorgon puppy that is literally eating my mind and body."

El pulled away from the goofy thing and helped Will do the same thing, a not-so-smart idea shining through her mind.

"Will." El stared at the slimy things. "Will, I ... Do you think I could blow these things up just like I did with what was holding you back? Is that why you asked me to come?"

The green-eyed brown, to the utter consternation of El, nodded with frightening confidence. He trusted her, he really believed she could help him.

"But what if I hurt you?" She looked at him pleadingly. "What if we both get hurt for nothing? And if it does not work ..."

Will shook his head. He seemed to be at peace with what was about to happen, seemed to have accepted the uncertain fate awaiting him.

"You're going to make it, El. I'm sure you will." He comforted her by pulling away the fringe that covered her green eyes. "I'm sure you'll be fine."

"Me? What about you? The issue here is you well."

Will sketched the saddest of smiles.

"The point here is to destroy this thing before it causes any more problems. You want this growing up to hurt Mike or Sheriff Hopper? Do you want any of our friends to get hurt?" El denied vehemently. "Do you think you can destroy that?"

The girl did not answer. The sudden possibility of something bad happening to Mike Wheeler or Jim Hopper stirred something inside her. She could not let anything hurt either of these, if something happened to them she certainly would not forgive herself.

As sure as the night he'd killed the demogorgon, El raised his chin and both hands. Slowly, opening the valve that held and concealed her powers, she allowed everything to come out.

Every strong, uncontrollable feeling she struggled every day to control, all the rage she felt for the lab and the people there, all the rage that was the remnant of Becky Ives's rejection ... She threw it all away with a single scream. El put it all out and kept yelling even as her head began to crack like an old radio starting to fail. She simply could not stop, not while that goofy thing was alive, being a threat to the life of Mike, Hopper, Max ... Of the friends, of her family.

"It worked, El!" She heard Will's voice exclaim. "It's working."

She wanted to respond, laugh and jump for joy just as he did. But she could not do it. It was as if everything was getting out of her control ...

"El, you're bleeding."

I do not bleed when I'm in such situations, Will. I do not bleed when I'm out of the real world, she wanted to retort and was unable to do so in the face of the horrible pain that was taking hold of her body.

Upon returning to the real world, El found himself unable to do anything but whimper with pain. Her head was exploding. She stumbled out of the bed of the still unconscious and pale Will Byers, and fell to the ground with a guttural scream.

"HOPPER" She shouted the name as if the old Sheriff was her salvation. "HOPPER! HELP ..."

She flinched in a ball of pain and blood as the bedroom door opened and Hopper, Joyce and the scientist walked in. Hopper immediately took her in his lap and started wiping her face.

"El, what do you have?" Hopper looked at the man. "What's wrong with her? What's wrong with my ... with her?"

"I do not know." The other stammered bent over her. "Maybe she's having a nervous breakdown as a result of overexertion. Nasal bleeding has overtaken the commonplace and now it's certainly bleeding ..."

"Fuck your diagnosis! Fuck this shit all you're talking about." El felt Hopper hug her body. "Do something to help her, to make that pain stop."

El arched his body up for air. She needed air. Why was not she breathing right?

"I can't breathe!" Cried clinging to the shirt of Jim Hopper. "I do not ..." She choked. "I can't breathe, Hopper."

"Calm down, El, it's going to be okay." Someone stroked her hair. The hand of the person in question was trembling. "You're not going to do

anything to help ?! Are you going to leave her like this?"

"I can't do anything, Mrs. Byers, the girl is no longer under the jurisdiction of Hawkins's lab. She is under the care of the Sheriff."

El shouted, shouted as loudly as he could. Why did it hurt so much? She had only helped Will, that's all. Doing good should not cause so much pain.

El heard herself screaming, heard Hopper yelling at the man, heard the glass of the bedroom windows gritting and shattering into a thousand pieces, she heard the constant slamming of doors as well as the explosion of some electronic device that was around. She was aware of everything and, at the same time, was not. The pain was taking her back into the darkness, the darkness of her.

"Fuck your fucking jurisdiction. You're going to do something to help my daughter." Hopper shouted. Had he called her daughter? "If she dies, I swear I'll expose all your filth, and if she's left with any sequel because of this omission of relief, I make your life a living hell, I destroy that ridiculous project that you and the government created. "

Dark spots began to blur El's vision until at last there was no trace of light left. The darkness had carried her away from the scene of despair that surrounded her. There was nothing left.

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Mike snuggled the sleepy little sister over the bed. The girl had invaded his room in the middle of the night and, in tears, had asked to sleep with him because he was afraid of the monsters that lived under her bed. Seeing no problem with the request, he had given her room to fit the bed.

As he searched for warm blankets for both of them, Mike's mind kept drifting toward a certain chocolate-brown chestnut. El. Was she and Will all right? There was no word from both of them and it only made Mike more apprehensive.

The truth is that Mike's chest was tight since he and his friends had seen El, dressed in carefully chosen clothes for the occasion, get into a car with Jim Hopper and Joyce Byers. She had been willingly willing to go to the laboratory, back to the place where they had locked her all her life. Mike, as nerd, was against any kind of violence, but it certainly would give it to her. If someone called him a loser or a terrorist after that, he would hit a fist in the idiot's face, no matter who it was.

Returning to bed with a few blankets, Mike heard the familiar static noise that indicated someone was trying to talk to him.

"Mike?" The sweet, unspoken voice of El called him. "Are you still awake?"

Mike covered Holly quickly and found himself stumbling toward the bedside table, where he had left the supercom.

"Heeey, El. I'm here, El. You can speak, El." He answered, flustered, not realizing his own agitation until he let out a weak laugh. A giggle too weak for his taste. "Are you okay? Is Will okay?"

"Will's fine, Mike, I think his mother took him home."

"You think so?" He choked under his breath as if someone had just snatched the air from his lungs. "Are you okay with you?"

A yawn as soft as silk followed. She sounded tired and distant. It was as if she, at that very moment, was unreachable.

"I'm fine, Mike, I'm just a little sleepy, Mike ... I do not think I'm going to school in the next few days."

"Why? Are you going to travel?"

"In a way, yes, I will not be more than a day or two." She yawned. "I guess I will not remember that later ..."

"To be talking to me?"

"Yeah." Her voice faltered for a few seconds. "Night, Mike."

Delayed, still under the effect of confused words from El, Mike ended up repaying the "good night" for the static of the supercom. El was no longer there to hear him, she had gone to sleep.

The next morning, when El did not show up at school, Mike, though his heart was tight, tried not to grieve as the others did. El was well, she had said that she was going to travel and that she and Will were well. Nor did he think about trying to visit Will; he was probably at rest, and Joyce Byers would not let him visit until he was fit.

Mike, Lucas, Max, and Dustin decided there was something very wrong going on when Will, seeming dejected, appeared at school with his older brother and a shabby Sheriff Hopper. There was no sign of El for exactly three days.

"She is sleeping." Hopper responded as the small group of teenagers intercepted him as he headed for the board. "She is in absolute rest."

Max frowned, his orange freckles uniting with each other.

"It was Will who was sick." The redhead pointed to her green-eyed friend who listened to everything in silence. He seemed to feel guilty. "Why on earth is El at rest if it was the Byers who was sick?"

Hopper stopped walking and faced the small group. Shaking his head at the confused expression the youngest sketched, he turned to Will and told him to tell him everything that had happened, and then he went with the silent Jonathan Byers.

Despite the insistent questioning of friends during school hours, Will refused to say anything before lunch. Burning with resentment, Mike found himself holding back the mad desire to squeeze his friend for information. If he knew what El had, it was not difficult at all to tell them. Why so much mystery?

"Okay, Byers, I'm glad you're okay, I'm really happy." Max bent over the lunch table, the peanut butter bread he had brought in to eat completely forgotten. "But if you do not start talking what you know, I swear by my skateboard that you'll be sorry."

Not at all shaken by Max's threat, Will tilted his head a little to the

side, his green eyes glittering with guilt.

"El saved me." Will declared. "She..."

"We know she saved you, that was last year."

"I do not remember the details very well, it's still foggy, but there was something in my head." The thing in my head was driving me crazy, at the same time, killing me. "

Mike listened in silence, not sure what the connection between El and his current state with it all was.

"El killed the thing that was inside my head." Will cringed. "She got into my head and killed the thing that was killing me."

Max exclaimed one "that's my girl!" while Lucas and Dustin celebrated. Mike did not join them. If El was not there with them, if she was at rest it meant that something had gone wrong.

"I do not really know what happened after that. My mother and the Sheriff said to kill the thing, being as tired as she was after days without sleep right, left her exhausted." The boy toyed with the chocolate pudding before him. "She went out after all."

She erased ... What did that mean she was dead? That she was in a coma?

"What?" Mike stammered. "Will ..."

"She's gone, she's been sleeping since it all happened, three days ago."

"She's in a coma?" Lucas asked for Mike, who at that moment had his mouth open, speechless.

"No. She's sleeping. Sleeping. Lab doctors took care of her and testified that for sure."

Mike, seeming to have come back to himself, shook his head to confirm that what he had heard was true. El was asleep (almost in coma).

Compressing his lips and seriously believing himself to be on the verge of madness, Mike remembered the disconnected conversation he'd had with him a few nights ago. That had been real, right? He was not going crazy, or was he? It had been so real, so true ...

"She's awake?" Dustin peered with his wild curls pointing everywhere. "She'll wake up, will not she?"

Mike had not yet thought of the possibility that he would not wake up. Dustin was right. What if she did not wake up? Worse! What if she woke up again without her memory, not knowing who she was?

"She woke up this morning, Dustin. As the sheriff said, she's at rest." Will looked at Mike. "Are you okay? You look pallid."

Declining Will's concern, Mike sought to change the subject, an idea shining through his mind. He had to go visit her, see how she was. Will (who was practically living in Hopper's house since Joyce refused to go there) agreed to see her at the end of class, as long as Hopper allowed, of course.

By the end of the day, late in the afternoon, the five teenagers crowded into the living room of Hopper's house, too frightened by the scowl that the man and Jake Wayfarer threw toward them to notice some detail of the decor of the place . Mike's conviction was almost dissolving.

Hopper crossed his arms over his chest. He looked menacing, like the mountain giants described in D & D.

"You came to visit her?" Jacob Wayfarer, next to Hopper, had a smug smirk on his lips. Both men had purple bags under their eyes, as if they had not slept in the last days. "Okay, the rules are simple: do not shake her, do not get her up, do not ask questions or get her tired."

Mike, who in recent weeks had visited Jim Hopper's house several times to the point that he already knew the way to El's bedroom by heart, was the first one to climb the stairs, to reach her room and also to find her awake .

Dressed in a red flannel dress, El was lying in her bed in the care of a

zealous Joyce Byers. The girl, despite her alarming pallor, looked well and managed to smile at him.

"Hi." She nodded weakly so he and his friends would approach. "I thought Hopper would not let you guys in. He's too overprotective."

"Do not say that, honey." Will's mother scolded softly. "He's just worried. We all are."

"I'm kidding, Mrs. Byers." El bent a little cough. "I appreciate the concern of yours."

Joyce Byers, finishing the work of combing El's curly hair, left the room repeating Hopper's instructions more gently.

"El" Max, pushing the boys out of his way, literally jumped on El. "I was so worried about you."

Faced with the clear discomfort El felt with her friend's weight on him, Mike, Dustin, Lucas, and Will soon tried to push the redhead away from her. El seemed to be in pain.

"I'm fine, people." El reassured hoarsely. Mike did not believe her. "I swear I'm fine. You do not have to stare at me like I'm a deceased."

Trying not to make El uncomfortable with the excessive attention she received, Mike, with the support of Dustin and Lucas, began to talk about random matters. It was out of the question to ask about what had happened in the lab between her and Will. She was tired, exhausted, and bringing it up was not pleasant. Besides, whatever she had done had worked.

El did not say much during his friends' stay in his room. She kept quiet, talking occasionally and only when it was strictly necessary. It still seemed unobtainable.

"I'm fine, Mike. Really." El said after catching him staring at her. "Believe me." And then, in the face of his clear disbelief, "I promise you, Mike, I'm fine."

Wishing fervently to believe in El's words, in the promise that she was well and in a future where everything would be all right for

them, Mike nodded at her. She is fine. She's here and she's fine. She is here, she is recovering and soon she will be well.

Taking advantage of the distraction of friends (Will was showing them the stock of candy that El kept in his room), Mike leaned a little closer to El, so that only she listened to him, and decided that it was time. Ever since she'd discovered she was not Sophie, but Eleven, Mike had made the decision to invite her to the winter ball. The problem was that he had not had the courage or time enough. But now, after the brief possibility of losing El again, he had decided to put fear and shyness aside and invite her.

The most I can receive is a no, he comforted himself mentally. He noticed that El's brown eyes were over him. Beneath her exhaustion, she looked slightly amused.

"Do you remember last year when we were both in the school?"

"When did you kiss me?" He nodded, slightly uncomfortable. "I remember vaguely."

Something in her smile indicated that she already knew what Mike's intentions were and that made him blush strongly.

"So, I was wondering if ..." She stalled as El took her hand. Her hand was cold.

"If you're trying to invite me to the winter ball, which is what I know you're doing, the answer is yes." She released his hand and groomed her hair delicately. "I agree to go to the winter ball with you."

"Do you want to go with me? You really want to go with the guy everyone calls a frog face."

El snuggled up the covers that Joyce Byers had piled on her before leaving the room. Mike's reactions seemed to amuse her immensely.

"From when I call nicknames?" Mike's heart stopped a beat when a bright smile lit up the face of El. "If I want something, I do. I want to go to the dance with you and I'm going to the prom with you. I do not care what people say about you and you went down to do the same. "

Satisfied with the answer, Mike smiled broadly. No, Mike did not care what Hawkins people said about him; he did not even care about the opinion his father had made about him. The only opinion that really mattered was El's opinion. If she was saying that she did not care what comments would come up after going to the snow ball with him, why should he answer then?

She's going to the ball with me, Mike thought in jubilation. After a year, he was finally going to be able to take El to the winter ball. El was in Hawkins, safe and sound (although she was too pale for Mike's taste, knew who they were, knew who she was, had someone who adored her and watched over her as a daughter.

He was going to take her to this winter ball, and if everything went well and went well, he would do it at the next balls that would happen at school. Mike did not intend to leave El go away from him again, did not intend to let her go again. Never.

24. The night we waited for a year

Mike, cruelly tight in the backseat between Dustin, Lucas, and Will, adjusted his tie nervously. That shit was making him breathless, he felt suffocated. Deep inside, he knew the problem was not the tie, but the fact that he was on his way to the winter ball. He had never been to the winter ball and definitely did not want to look ugly in front of El, did not want to embarrass her.

On the other side of the car, looking as pale as the times when he was throwing slugs, Will was pressed against the exit door, his green eyes fixed on the landscape and the signs indicating that they were entering the grounds of the school. He was as nervous as Mike, but his nervousness was noticeably different. While Mike's nervousness indicated a slight anxiety, Will seemed to be about to have a fit of nerves. He was cold, almost scared.

He wanted to console his friend, but he gave up on the idea when it had barely popped into his mind. There was no way he could hear his words of consolation, not when Dustin and Lucas, sitting right in the middle of the car, were arguing so fervently. The discussion, for a change, was about Max. The girl, after much insistence since she did not like dances and things that forced her to wear dresses, had said that she would go to the ball with one of the two. It was winter night and she had not yet told who she was going to.

"She's going with me, Dustin." Lucas scoffed. "I'm just saying this to prepare you. You know, being rejected is never a good thing."

Dustin laughed. The boy had a surprisingly high self-esteem, not being shaken by almost anything.

"Of course she goes with you, Lucas. She'll take you to a far corner and gently tell you she's very sorry, but she'll be my snowball pair."

"You're delirious, Henderson."

"And you being a complete jerk ..."

"Shut up both of you!" Nancy growled, braking the car.

More curious to know where he was than worried about Nancy's irritation (it had taken her too long to get irritated), Mike peeked in on what was happening outside the car. The set of old cars parked (owned by the school's teachers) indicated that they were already in the school parking lot. There were few students walking around, most were already inside the gym.

"The girl will choose one of you, okay? Relax!" Nancy half advised, half shouted. Beside her, Jonathan Byers laughed. "Relax or you'll end up scaring her and in the end going all night."

Jonathan, Will, Dustin, and Lucas jumped out of the car, the last two looking crestfallen. Relieved, Mike jumped out of the car and was about to join the rambling wheel that friends and Jonathan had formed when Nancy intercepted him.

"What is it, Nance?" He took off his seat belt. "Something with Holly?"

"Holly? No, no, our sister is very well." Nancy leaned against the hood of the car and Mike did the same. "I just want to talk to you. You know, brother and sister talk."

Mike frowned and tried to pull away as the blonde began to comb his hair.

"Leave me, Nance!"

"Come on, Mike, just listen to me. It's your first date with a girl and I have some tips for you." Mike folded his arms. He was impatient with his sister, but also curious. "Okay, the first thing you have to do is be kind, be kind to her, praise the dress and makeup."

He nodded, making mental notes and realizing that doing it would not be difficult at all. He always tried to be as gentle as possible with El and, frankly, to say that she was beautiful would be no effort at all. She was always pretty. Ever.

The first time Mike had noticed how pretty Eleven was not when she had worn her blonde wig and pink dress, and yes, when she ... When he had noticed she was a girl. Regardless of having hair or not, for

Mike she would always be the most beautiful among all the girls.

"Do you understand, Mike? Be gentle and everything will work out." Nancy patted his shoulder. "Jesus, Mike, when did you grow up? Already going to snowball with a girl." She sniffed. "It's going to be your wedding in a little while. I'm not ready to go to your wedding, Mike."

Mike wanted to disappear, hide his face on the asphalt.

"Nance, are you drunk? I'm thirteen, I'm not going to get married, Crazy. I do not even have a girlfriend."

"I know, it's just ... Yesterday you were a baby, a freckly little thing that Mom carried around and now she looks at you. Come to the winter ball with a girl is the first step to have a Oh, Jesus, how did you grow up?"

The words of Nancy, thank God, were drowned out by the loud sound of the police car entered the parking lot. El and Max had arrived.

The first one to get out of the car was Max, and if it had not been for his red hair and freckled face, Mike would not have recognized her. With the red hairs tied up in a braid studded with shiny little things, Maxine, the California girl, wore a silver silk undershirt, pleated skirt, jacket, and black all star. She looked like a small reluctant rock star.

El went downstairs and Mike lost his breath. She wore a delicate swirled dress that, in the light of the moon and the post, seemed to oscillate between blue and lilac. Her curly hair was surprisingly smooth and beautifully adorned with a subtle wreath. As she approached, Mike noticed that there were small colored pebbles strategically placed around his eyes making them shine in a beautiful light brown.

"Beautiful" was a word of little significance to define it at that moment. She looked ... She did not look real; she did not look like someone who had a bunch of nerds. She looked like a real fairy princess. An angel. Someone unreachable, someone Mike should not

get involved with if he did not want to be rejected. But she had not rejected him and that was what made her different from the other girls, that and many other things.

"I exaggerated?" El asked so that only he would listen. Everyone was focused on Max and this seemed to be a relief to her. "I'm really sorry if I overdid it. Who did this to me was Mrs. Byers. Will's mother was thrilled since I said I was coming to snowball with you and did it all to me ..."

"I ... You're perfect." The two blushed when Nancy, the only one who paid attention to them (Jonathan was busy with Will and his partner, Myra Levesque), muttered something embarrassing. "Perfect."

El smiled beautifully.

"You're not bad either," she said, but her smile indicated that the gentle remark went far beyond that set of words.

Nancy, her eyes shining with unconcealed pride (she had been acting like a careful chicken mom whenever she was about Mike, Holly, or El), stole her boyfriend's camera, and decreed no one would enter school before she took pictures so that this memorable occasion would be imprinted in eternity.

Reluctantly, Mike let his sister take off his coveted pictures and then found a way to dribble her and run into the school when she realized how uncomfortable he felt in the face of all that attention.

"The camera flash was making me dizzy," she confided as they crossed the school corridors. "That whole clarity reminds me of bad things."

"Bad things?" Mike asked curiously. Why the flash of a camera could disturb The much?

"You've never been alone in the forest during a storm, have you?" "It's awful, Mike, I thought I'd die from the cold or lightning would hit me, fry me to death."

El blinked slowly, lost in memories.

"Forget it, El. No bad thoughts tonight, okay?"

Encouraged by Mike's words, El changed the subject and directed their attention to the noisy trio walking in front of them. Max, Lucas, and Dustin walked arm in arm, the redhead standing between the two boys. With a restrained smile, she told him that Max had decided she would go to the ball with Lucas and Dustin, who did not have to decide between either of them, after all, they were friends.

"She likes them both the same way." Confidentially. "You have no preference for anyone."

"I know. It's just ... One hour she's going to have to decide who to stay with."

"When the time comes, she'll choose, Mike. No one's going to break the heart, I assure you."

"You really think so?" He asked uncertainly. He did not believe that Lucas and Dustin's feelings for Max went beyond friendship, but having El saying it in all its letters made it all different. More real, maybe.

"I'm sure."

There was a note in El's voice that indicated that she wanted to add something else, but her voice was lost in a sigh of delight as they reached the school gymnasium, where the prom would happen that night.

Mike could not see what had charmed both El. Despite the ornaments, the corny music and colored lights, that was still the same school gym which Mike was used to suffer during the exercise classes and basketball games he was forced to participate. He could see absolutely nothing charming about it all.

The only thing that really charmed him in that environment was the brightness that El had in his brown eyes, the silly smile she had on his lips and the marvelous air surrounding her. El was the loveliest thing Mike would ever see all night.

They chose a table away from the lights and attentions of the other students and soon dispersed. Myra, showing that despite her sleek body was an attitude girl, dragged Will to watch together the fake snowflakes that adorned the place. Max, with Lucas and Dustin in tow, left promising her friend that she would play her favorite songs.

Mike, not knowing what to do, looked up at El. Twinkling under the lights of the gym, she looked as lost as he. The fact is that, having never been to a ball before, neither of them knew what to do next or how to act.

"Mike?" She called. His voice was soft, and if Mike paid close attention (which he always did when she was the subject), he would notice that she danced softly, discreetly, to the music. "Joyce explained to me that it is usually the boy who takes the girl to dance, but ... Do you want to dance with me?"

"YES!" El's brown eyes widened at his high exclamation. Some students passing by gave him glances that split between irritation and amusement. "Of course I want to dance with you. I did not know if you wanted to dance with me, that's why I did not invite you. I thought you, I do not know, would want to walk around first, admire the place, see people . "

"I want to dance with you." El said softly, taking his hand. For the last few days she had taken his hand with a convenient and pleasant frequency. She then began to guide them closer to the other students, those who were engaged in dancing. "I do not care about the decor or whatever you have here in the gym tonight."

With his heart pounding madly against his chest, Mike put both hands around El's waist and blushed, though very pleased, as she wrapped her arms around his neck and gave no indication that he would take them from there. It was a comfortable position for him; made him even more aware of El's presence, almost managing to feel the excitement radiating from her.

Using the slow steps Nancy had forced Jonathan and Steve to teach him ("Dad should be teaching you, but for a change, he's still at work. I hope you do not mind Steve and Jonathan teaching you to dance," Nancy had muttered with a lively Holly in his slender arms), Mike

began to move slowly, taking care not to step on El's feet. Initially the movement went awkwardly to him and to her, but soon this strangeness passed and everything started to come out naturally. It was as if the two of them had done it many times before, as if dancing was something natural for the Hawkins lab girl and the frog face.

Being so close to El was intoxicating and at the same time difficult. It was hard to concentrate on anything beyond her bright eyes. Those pebbles in her eyes made her charming in a way that Mike had never before believed was possible. She seemed unreal, almost as if she were going to disappear at any moment, flee back to the fantasy world from which she had fled.

The smile, which had previously been restrained, seemed to widen when a melodic music that Mike did not know began to echo around the room. Following her gaze, Mike met Max, flanked by Dustin and Lucas, holding a lacrosse bat and staring gravely at the boy who took care of the songs they would play that night.

"She ... Where ... Since when are there lacrosse tactics here? Do we practice lacrosse here at this school?"

El, who in the last few minutes had been humming along with the music, shrugged.

"Since when do you care about sports?"

"I'm not interested, it's just ... El, what are you doing?"

El did not answer, just stood on tiptoe and kissed him. She kissed him. It was a quick kiss, as innocent as the first, but equally ecstatic. It was enough to get Mike out of orbit for a few seconds, enough to make him think of how El's kiss was delicate and soft.

"You kissed me." Mike stammered out of breath. "You kissed me in front of all these people."

"I wanted to kiss you." She replied simply. She seemed pleased with herself. "It was ... Well? Did I do something wrong?"

Not that Mike was an expert or had kissed other girls before he had

kissed El (she had been the first one, actually), but he definitely did not see anything wrong in the way she had kissed him. It had been ... Exciting.

"It was good." She pressed her forehead against hers. "It was great."

The two continued to dance, completely forgetful of the world or the other students who were around them. For a brief moment, only the two existed. At that moment Eleven was a normal girl, whose past was not stained with blood and tears and Mike was not the frog face, Ted Wheeler's not at all athletic son. They were a normal boy and a girl, that's all.

Encouraged by El kiss that robbed him, Mike leaned over and kissed her again. This time it was clearly different from the last two. Even as he continued with his original naivete, naivete which neither of them would abdicate so soon, this new kiss lasted longer than the others. Inept, Mike decided he loved kissing El.

"Guys?" Dustin's voice brought them back to reality. "FOLKS! HEY ?! LOOK AT ME! WE HAVE URGENT AFFAIRS! I REALLY LYING, BUT THE PEOPLE NEED TO GO AWAY. "

Mike and El separated quickly, both blushing.

"What is it, Dustin?" El asked, still wrapping his arms around Mike. "Why do we have to go? We just arrived."

Dustin nodded to El.

"First of all, we've been here for almost two hours, and for almost two hours you've been dancing and kissing. Secondly: We already have problems. The director caught Max threatening Jackson, the party DJ, and she's hiding out there. "Dustin stared at a fixed point." And the other problem ... Well, there's that one there. "

The two followed Dustin's gaze and found Will, whose face was as pale as a sheet of paper, had in his hands a glass of empty punch. The red liquid that was supposed to be inside the Byers boy's glass was spotting the dress of Audrey Whithburn, a blond-haired girl with blue eyes and who was mostly Troy's pair.

"He destroyed her dress," El whined, moving away from Mike. "Troy is going to destroy his face."

Mike shook his head in agreement.

"Troy will only do this if you let him in. Come on, El, we just need a little distraction to get Will out of here with no scratches."

Looking disappointed with the sudden interruption, El closed her eyes. The lights in the hall immediately blinked, but that was not enough and she knew it. Still with her eyes closed, she made a brief nod.

"Done." She declared it sounding hoarse, her nose bleeding subtly. "I need you to get him out of there. You have ten seconds before that happens."

"What will happen?"

"Now it's nine seconds, Dustin."

"El ...?"

"Eight seconds ... Go ahead, Dustin!" Mike scolded his friend, annoyed. How well timed was Dustin Henderson's timing? It was the second time he had interrupted a kiss between him and El, and that was not satisfactory.

Grunting to himself, Dustin ran to Will and grabbed him by the collar, tugged him out of the gym. Troy was about to chase after them when it happened. As if someone had thrown a bomb into the punch or punched it with a giant invisible hand, the red liquid exploded, bathing everyone around it.

On his side, El, who was hurrying along, hesitated for a few seconds after the poche blast. Noticing the worry on his face, she smiled. That did not fool him at all, so much so that when they were outside the school, at a safe distance from Troy, he forced him to sit down.

"I cannot believe the director decided to implicate me. I do not believe it." Max hugged the lacrosse bat with a crying face. "El, I'm sorry I spoiled your evening."

Looking tired, El dismissed Max's concern.

"All right, Maxie." And then, when Will was about to apologize. "No problem, Will."

"You used your powers in public, Hopper and my mother said you should not do that." Will scolded as Mike, who had made sure he always had a tissue in the pocket of whatever clothes he wore, helped him wipe his nose. "You're still recovering."

"Well, I just give me high. I'm fine. Besides, it's not like someone inside had noticed what did I do. Nobody knows about me."

Will seemed to be about to reply to El's answer when Dustin raised a much more pertinent question: what would they do from that moment on? Staying at school or on school grounds was out of the question, but where would they go?

Max and Lucas said they should go to the arcade ("Night is a child!"), But Dustin and Will completely opposed the idea, saying they'd better go to Mike's house, where Joyce, Jonathan and Hopper said would be waiting. Mike and El did not say: The girl was silent, staring at the stars that glittered in Hawkins's dark sky, and he was busy admiring her and making sure she was really well.

"Are you okay? You do not look well."

"Relax, Mike. I'm fine. Do not freak out, Okay?" She looked back at the stars shining in the sky. "It's a beautiful night, is not it?"

Mike did not look at the sky or at the stars. He stared at El, his eyes fixed on the small, brown-haired girl.

"Beautiful, really beautiful." He sighed, unable to contain the charm he felt for her. "You would have been the snow queen, you know? The most beautiful girl at the party was you."

"It was good while it lasted, the party, I say. It was magic." El shook. "Are you cold too?"

Shaking his head, Mike pulled the jacket itself and forced El to wear it. Of course she was cold; though beautiful, the dress she wore was

no use to ensure a minimum of comfort in the cold of Hawkins' early winter.

Believing his coat was not enough to heat the chestnut, Mike wrapped his arms around her and snuggled her close to him. Suddenly he was no longer doing it just to warm her, his concern for her had become a necessity. Being close to her at that moment was a necessity to him. It was as if she were a magnet and he was a little metal clip drawn toward the force that called it.

"And you two?" Will asked suddenly, turning to them. A smile of satisfaction rose on his lips as he saw the position where El and Mike were standing. "What do you two think? Arcade or your house, Mike?"

"Let's go to my house." He answered without hesitation.

Mike did not move away from El in no time. Despite interacting and laughing at the jokes his friends let out as they walked, he dared not move away or allow El to disappear from his field of vision. Deep down he feared that when he left her, he would disappear again. It was a silly fear, but beyond doubt it would be pertinent in his life.

They were at the four corners of his house when El, surprising him (it was always a surprise when she did this), leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. Mike was still recovering when she, still in her rush of actions and emotions, took his hand.

"You were the most handsome dance boy too, Mike." He whispered, causing pink to flood his cheeks. "Just so you know."

Mike smiled at her. That was a compliment you, especially if coming from El.

ooo

El stopped before the house of Wheeler and also hand in hand with Mike frowned. There were several cars parked at the entrance to the

house, but one in particular attracted her attention. She did not usually notice cars, but it was hard not to notice a car as decadent as that. Another peculiarity of the car was that its sign indicated that the owner had come from far away, that he was even from Hawkins.

And yet there was that warm feeling she'd been feeling since she had awakened that morning. It was not the good old excitement as Hopper and Joyce had asserted; it was something else, and now, standing there where he was, he was sure that that comfortable warmth was growing. It was a different heat from what she experienced whenever she was about Mike Wheeler, it was not so hot or he was pushing her to do things like kissing him; It simply was ... Comfortable.

The hubbub of the high, rambling conversation of adults who clearly tried (and failed) to have a civilized conversation was the first thing that greeted them as soon as Mike opened the door to the house. The second thing that greeted them was a smiling blonde. She jumped, not into the arms of his older brother, but for El arms.

"Bonjour, jolie petite chose." El greeted the girl in French. In recent times the French had come out of her lips with frightening ease, almost as if it were her native language. "You look beautiful with these braids, you know that?"

Holly blushed under the attentive glances of the teenagers. Mike had once said that the girl never cut, but there she was upsetting him.

"You look like an angel." Holly's baggy smile widened. "And you talk to the pretty lady in the room."

"What lady, Holly?" Mike asked his sister as El caressed her hair. It must be nice to have as much hair as she had.

"The lady who is looking for her daughter, Jane, do you know any Jane?"

El's smile died. Jane was her name, the name her mother had given her. Jane was a name she would have grown up with if Papa had not stolen her from her breast. She was Jane Ives, the daughter of Terry Ives.

She passed Holly to Mike and then, flanked by her friends, walked slowly toward the living room. The sensation of heat growing with every step she took.

The living room of Mike's house was full of adults. Hopper, Jacob and Joyce, pale, talked to each other in a wheel that clearly did not accept anyone but them. Mike's father was there as well, he slept sound asleep in his reclining chair, as if nothing was happening. Jonathan and Nancy, hugging each other, were talking in grave tones. Karen Wheeler was on the other side of the room, with two women with brown hair as pale as hers.

El had never before seen those women who talked with Mike's mother, but ... they were familiar to her. It was as if ... as if she already knew them from another.

One of the women, the tallest one with her hair carefully tied in a braid, looked up from the conversation and fixed them on El. She had big brown eyes and a warm smile. She was very pretty and there was something about her, the way she looked at El, which made the girl feel ... Well. She felt good.

"Ma petite fille, Ma belle petite princesse, Ma Jane." The woman said loudly away from the two she had been talking to. "My Jane. You ... You're so beautiful."

El gave a squeaky little noise and, as the woman was advancing toward her, found himself retreating. Immediately, as if they had combined the movement, El's friends moved around her. The small group of teenagers was ready to defend her from the woman.

"Who are you? You're Becky Ives?" Max, who, like the others, knew about Becky's aversion to him and hated her through it, growled at his wife. "Stay away from my friend, you hell-bitch! You're not going to get close to my friend, not after I've said, written, those shit about her."

"You will not say anything more about our friend!" Lucas growled protectively. "You will not get near her."

The woman stopped trying to approach and just stared at the small

group with a silly smile on her lips.

Something snapped inside El's head before images and feelings exploded inside her mind. Carefully chosen baby bathrobes. A yellow room with carefully painted pink curtains with dolls and plush teddy bears. A sad song. Love, an immensity of love and affection. Appreciation. Fault. Guilty for letting Brenner destroy something so precious ...

"Mama," El stammered, pulling away his friends and approaching the woman of his own free will. "Maman."

"Hello, my little princess." Terry looked at Hopper, Jacob, and Joyce. She seemed uncertain, almost lost. "W-can I talk to her? Just a conversation, I promise."

Hopper and Jacob hesitated and only consented to Terry's request when Joyce Byers patted the two of them and whispered something El could not understand. El understood nothing else. They'd told her that Terry was not upset, that her mother was alive in her body, but that in her mind she was gone. They had not lied to her; this time the girl had made sure and saw for herself how sad her mother's situation was. But then what ...?

El was about to follow Terry Ives to Mike's basement ("No one will bother them there," Karen had stated looking at Max, insulted by the girl's cursing.), When he intercepted her. His eyes, large as ever, asked if she would be okay with Terry if she was sure of what she was doing.

Oh, Mike, I'm sure of nothing, but it does not hurt to try, does it?

"It's my mom, Mike." He answered the silent question of the star-faced boy. "I'll be fine, I always will."

Stifling the ardent desire to hide behind Mike or Hopper, El, under the eyes of all adults (including the woman she believed to be Becky Ives), led Terry into the basement.

Terry had barely closed the basement door behind him and El was already running toward the fort that Mike had built for her. This was

her place (and his), the place where she'd felt safe for the first time, and the place where she could study Terry, no matter how she felt.

Terry Ives was a beautiful woman. She had long brown hair that fell on her shoulder through a braided lining, was high and wore clothes that contrasted a lot with the clothes that Joyce Byers wore. There was also ...

"Your nose." El pointed as Terry sat down before her. Woman did not seem to have a problem sitting on the floor. "He's bleeding."

"It's a side effect, Princess." She took his face in his hands and caressed it carefully. "My girl ... I'm sorry they did this to you, I'm so sorry. It was not my intention, I did not know they would take you away from me, they would do that to you."

"Mama" El tried to speak the word. It sounded strange coming from her, it sounded wrong. "What..."

"We don't have much time, princess, I do not have much time, I need to talk to you, we need to have our first and last, mother-daughter talk."

Terry lifted his arms, and immediately, without hesitation, he lunged at her. Terry's arms were warm and warm, as if that were her place. El allowed himself to close his eyes for a few seconds, lying with the sensation. That was her mom, her mom was there beside her and ...

"You're going to take me away, mama?" She asked with a sinking heart. She did not want to leave Mike behind; feared not take it away from him again. "I don't want to leave, Mom ..."

Terry wiped away the tears streaming down the girl's face. El even had felt that she was crying.

"Don't cry, my precious. I'll not take you away. I just want to talk to you, that's all." A minute of silence, the conversation from upstairs made itself heard. Hopper was arguing with someone, perhaps the woman who had been accompanying Terry. "Just listen to me, baby, just listen to me."

El, who was accustomed to listen to others more than herself, nodded

solemnly. If her mother was asking for attention so seriously she should have a reason. She could almost feel the motive pulsing inside Terry's skin.

"I'll not stay here with you, my dear, I will not know who you are for much longer. This is an anomaly in my condition, a mistake that will not happen again anytime soon." Terry tilted his head a little, his face kind. "I just want ... There's so much to talk about, my girl, and I do not even have time to tell you everything."

"You'll be back ..."

"Crazy? For the world, for your Aunt Becky? Yes. For you? Never." Terry took her hand. "Honey, you can talk to me whenever you want."

"You said..."

"I know what I said, sweetie. Listen to me, try to understand me. You are different from others, it is remarkable, and that is what connects us. You can talk to me using their powers, dear. Whenever you want you can talk I'm not going to answer you always, but you can talk to me. "

The girl looked at her mother with understanding. The void ... Terry was saying he could find her both in the void and in the real world.

"Becky, she hates me, Mom."

"She hates *me*, Jane, but she'll get over it. She'll notice the precious thing that you are one day." Terry shook El. "But you do not need it, honey. You have a family, have your friends and ... I think it also has a boyfriend. You have a boyfriend, darling?"

El could blush.

"He's not my boyfriend. It is not yet and I think it will take to be. He's shy."

"Take the lead. If he is shy, take the lead for him." Another round of silence. "My Jane, I know you're trying to build a new life, but ... Honey, the past will not leave you alone any time soon. You still have

a lot to deal with, but your friends will help you. They are loyal, my dear, and like me they will always be with you. "

El did not know what to think or how to feel. There was her mother, the woman who had given birth to her, who had become involved with Brenner and who in recent years had been in a vegetative state, saying that things would not be okay. Her mother was saying that nothing would be alright.

"It's going to be okay, my girl. You will overcome everything that is to come and you will have a normal life."

El suppressed the urge to nod and a negative grunt. She knew she would never have a normal life, not being who she was, but the truth was that she wanted to believe it. She wanted to believe that there was a normal life reserved for her in the future, she wanted to believe that one day she would be a normal girl with a normal family and a guy who liked and accepted her.

A sudden smile broke on the girl's lips. She was already halfway to having everything she wanted, everything she had ever wanted since she was just a little lab girl. Hopper was now her family, and if her calculations were right, Joyce, Jonathan, and Will would soon be part of this family as well. And there was Mike, the boy who had liked and accepted her from the first moment, regardless of anything.

She was not normal, but what did it matter if those around her loved her like that?

25. Epilogue

"Ridiculous. Definitely pathetic."

Mike stared at the two disposable objects inside the box before him and immediately felt himself blushing. He could not give it to El, what would she think of him?

The pink dress doll and the white teddy bear stared at him from inside the box, his glassy eyes gleaming mockingly. El was no more four or five, she certainly would not like to get a damn porcelain doll and a teddy bear whose neck was adorned with a ridiculously large bow. She was twelve, she was completing thirteen that morning, of course she would not want those damn presents Mike had bought her.

He lay on the bed with an angry grunt and it caught Holly's attention. The girl had not let go of him since Nancy had announced that she and Jonathan were going to New York University together. It was as if she feared that Mike would do the same thing if he left her. Of course he intended to go to New York University (it was his dream), but that was not going to happen now, and when it finally happened, Holly would already be at the age where everything and everyone is the target of his harmonious fury.

"What's the matter, Mike?" Holly asked as she sat down next to him. "Are you having a stomach ache? Are you constipated?" Jenna Smulind was constipated this morning at the school playground.

"I'm not constip ..." He broke off, suddenly horrified. "You know what a constipation is, Holl's?"

The blonde laughed at her older brother's expression.

"I do not know, Mickey. But it's a bad thing, right? Cause pain. Jenna Smulind seemed to be in pain."

Relieved, Mike smiled and pulled his sister so she would fall beside

him too. Maybe he was wrong, after all, maybe Holly would still be sweet even during her transition from cute blonde to preteen.

"I'm not constipated, Holl's. My problem is another." He pointed at the doll and the teddy bear. "I spent my entire allowance on those mer ... In those crap and I do not think El will like them."

"El ... You're talking about Jane, the daughter of my mother's friend, the Sheriff's niece whom we know as Sophie and who now likes to be called El!" Mike laughed, nodding. "PFF! Of course she'll like it. It's a very pretty doll and a very cute teddy bear."

"She's thirteen, Holly. She's too old to play with dolls and other crap like that."

"You also have dolls and has thirteen years." Holly snorted as she turned to him. "Besides, if you thought she would not like it, why did she buy it?"

Mike swallowed the question, unable to answer. Why had he bought that? Why, when he'd entered the big pink world that was El's room to visit her, the first thing he'd noticed was the complete absence of dolls or stuffed bears. She had clothes, makeup, shoes, books; everything but a little doll. Even Max had dolls (not that she liked them), but El, who was so delicate, had none. In Mike's eyes, that was completely unfair.

At first the idea seemed to have been good, so much so that he had used up all the allowance that Karen Wheeler had given him and had risked entering a shop to buy everything, but now, when everything was laid out before him, already packed and ready to be delivered to the mistress, looked pathetic.

"She'll like it, Mickey." Holly comforted. "Sophie / Jane / El's really cool. And beautiful. Very beautiful."

They were both silent. Mike creating the courage to deliver the present to El and Holly ... Holly just stood there, next to her big brother.

Mike, after a few minutes contemplating the ceiling of the room, rose

up in a rush of courage and closed the gift box. Under the curious glance of her younger sister, she made an awkward tie over the gift box and ran for a shower. When he left the bathroom, fully dressed, he found Holly struggling to put on her white walking boots.

"What are you doing?" He asked sitting the girl on the bed and helping her put on her boots. "Are you going to one of your friends?"

"No, I'm going to Sophie's house with you."

The boy choked.

"You know what Mom's rules are, Holl's, you know Mom does not like us to leave without asking permission. You asked for her?"

That question was a pretext, an attempt to escape the company of his younger sister. It was not that he did not like having Holly close to him and apparently being the center of his little world. Was not it. It was just ... It would be embarrassing to deliver that to El, Holly's presence would only make it worse. What if he stuttered? What if he stumbled and Holly and El were there seeing everything? It would be so embarrassing.

The glow in Holly's blue eyes became watery, as if she were about to cry. She was going to cry. Shit! He had made little Holly cry, he had made his little sister cry.

He gave up the job of putting his sister away and took her in his lap. (As puberty knocked on the door, doing that became easier).

"You're going to leave me like Nancy is not. You're going to do the same thing as Nancy, Mike!" She cried, hitting little streaks on his chest. It did not hurt at all; Mike was already used to being Troy's punching bag.

Mike pressed her against him.

"No, I'm not leaving you, Holl's. Nancy did not leave you either, she just went to college." He walked with the girl in his arms from side to side. "If you want to go with me to El's house, okay. You come with me, we just have to tell Mom and ..."

"Mommy left." She sniffed. She was still crying and it broke his heart.
"Only Daddy's home."

All right, that made things difficult. Mike really did not want to go ask his father's permission, he did not even want to address the man who yelled at his mother every night. But it was for Holly, it was for her sister.

"I'll ask with you." He sighed. "But I only ask if you promise to behave when we get there, the Sheriff does not like the mess."

Holly nodded, hiding her little face in the hollow of his neck. She was still crying, but she was pleased with his brother's assertion and acceptance. She was still on Mike's lap when he stopped in front of Ted Wheeler to ask permission.

Ted, lying in his chair, his eyes fixed on the television (he was passing a baseball championship), barely noticed the pale, freckled teenager holding the tearful blonde girl in his lap. He did not notice them, not until the teenager cleared his throat.

"Can I take Holly with me to the sheriff's house?"

Saying "yes" was simple, would not require much effort on Ted's part and would leave Mike free to go to El's house. But nothing was simple. Ted, who never bothered to pay attention to what the only son did, frowned and stared at the boy.

"What are you going to do at the Sheriff's house?"

Mike froze where he was. His father was not simply asking; he was demanding an answer.

"I, uh ... I'm going to see Sophie. It's her birthday."

"Sophie? The girl who went to the prom with you?"

"Yeah ..."

Even though he was completely oblivious to what happened in

Hawkins, Ted Wheeler certainly knew who Sophie was (or wondered who she was). He remembered her as the girl Mike had taken to snowball.

Ted turned his eyes back to the television and this made Mike breathe in relief. He would no longer have to face his father's questions, he would no longer have to be in the same environment as himself. That was fine.

"Don't come back late. Your sister has to sleep early."

Muttering a thank-you under his breath, Mike tossed Holly and El's gift closer to him and stumbled out of the house. He was desperate to get out, to finally go to meet El.

Mike, with Holly's little hands around his waist, pedaled toward El's house like a madman, the path already so certain in his mind that he did not even look at the name of the streets he was going through. In less than three months, he already knew how to draw the path of El's house with his eyes closed. She lived a few streets after his house; it was close to the city, the residential area, but far enough away that the curious were not to be found around the place.

He still had his mind set on it when he stopped the bike in front of the Sheriff's house and came face to face with the small, bare-headed group huddled on the stairs of Jim Hopper's house. Max, Will, Lucas and Dustin. They were all dressed up, each holding what Mike was supposed to be gifts for the birthday of El. Unfortunately there was no sign of her.

Feeling a horrible cold trickle down his spine, Mike glanced back at the doors and windows of the house, and found it all open. If everything was open, why were they all out there?

Will, with a hesitant smile on his lips, rose from where he was and helped Holly off the bike.

"Hi, Holly. She came out with the sheriff and Jacob." The brown confided to Mike. "My mother is inside, making a cake for her. Mom threw us out, she put us out."

Mike, with the help of Will and Holly, stowed the bike in the back of Hopper's house and returned to his friends in time to catch the gist of the matter. They were arguing where Hopper had taken El.

"I don't know anything," Will grunted as his eyes fell on him. "They just took her today after lunch. They said something about a surprise."

Surprise ... What a surprise they had prepared for El? Mike could not think much longer about this, had to get up from where he had sat. Holly, who had been investigating the area that formed the façade of El and Hopper's house, had just tripped over and he had to console her.

"Why did you bring her?" Max asked aloud.

"Because I wanted to." Mike grunted, catching Holly in his lap and cherishing his younger sister's sobs. "Because she wanted to."

"You spoil her too much." Lucas stated. "Dude, sometimes you seem to be her father."

The boy rolled his eyes at his friends, his mouth already open to retort when the unmistakable clatter of tires crushing gravelled him. A car was approaching Sheriff Jim Hopper's house, El was coming home.

Everyone settled when an ordinary blue car, not the police car with which Jim Hopper used to drive around the city, parked in front of the house. The five teenagers and the little girl got up when Jacob and Hopper jumped out of the two front seats. The small group then smiled when El, wearing a pink dress, white cardigan and slippers, stepped out of the car with Hopper's help.

When her big brown eyes met his, Mike knew he'd had a great day. She was exultant, could barely contain the joy she felt. Mike could almost feel her joy, as if she was conveying what she felt.

"Shit, Hopper!" Jacob looked at them as if they were a bunch of cheap asquerozas. Seriously, did El believe that he was not a bad person? The guy was lousy. "I can deal with a teenager, but six and ...

and a blonde little girl? That's too much for me."

El passed him with his chin raised, a malicious grin.

"When I think that you cannot be coarser, Wayfarer, you excels. Congratulations, asshole." But as she bent over a curious Holly, Mike noticed there was no trace of irritation in her. El still shone in his joy. "Hey, blond angel. What do you have?"

"She fell." Mike whispered, his cheeks flushed. El was very close to him. "She's upset about it."

Holly sniffed softly and pushed Mike's neck out of the gap.

"Hi." She lifted her arms so that the other girl would pick it up and smiled when her wish was promptly answered. "Happy Birthday."

Mike did not have the opportunity to rejoice El as his sister did; he had barely opened his mouth when Max, followed by Dustin and Lucas, ran him over and threw themselves at him and Holly.

To Mike's misfortune, he also failed to congratulate or approach El during the course of the party. It was as if all his friends, including Holly, had joined in a plot to keep him from approaching her. That was cruel to him. Very cruel. He wanted to be near her, he really wanted to be near her, but ... What if this was a hint of the universe? What if, by keeping El away from him, the universe was indicating that it was best not to give her that silly present? Maybe that was it.

Taking advantage of the fact that no one, not even Holly, was looking at him, Mike got up from where he was sitting and, with the present half hidden, tried to run away from home. There was a possibility shining inside his head, the possibility of hiding the corny gift he had bought in one of the shrubs and then gifting her with anything but pathetic.

"Mike?" El called him when he was at the height of the side door of the house, the exit he had mistakenly believed to be the most discreet. "You're leaving?"

Trying to hide the present behind him, the brunette turned to El with a little yellow smile that soon became true. He could not smile yellow

at her, especially seeing the blush of joy that stained her cheeks.

"Me? No, no, I'm just going to take a breath, that's all." He breathed hard, lying to El with no air.

"Mike?" She smiled as she approached him enough for him to notice the lilac frost on her cheek. "Friends don't lie. Besides, you're a lousy liar."

"What?" Mike squealed, making her laugh. "I'm not lying."

El became serious.

"I can feel your lie, Wheeler. Are you going to tell me what it is?"

Mike looked around, bewildered. He did not want them to see the gift he had bought her, they would laugh at him until the day he had his own children.

"Okay," El smiled patiently. "We can talk outside. I really want to tell you something, you know."

Impelled by curiosity to know what El wanted to tell him and completely forgotten the embarrassment he felt for the present he had bought for her, Mike went to the balcony and paralyzed with what he saw outside the house. Jim Hopper and Joyce Byers were outside but apparently the two were busy kissing each other to notice the presence of the two astonished teenagers.

Burning his face, Mike looked away from the scene, remembering something El had confided to him recently. Smiling proudly, she had told him that she suspected Joyce and Hopper were dating or that they were about to, just to explain Joyce's constant presence about their home. Well, there was confirmation that El needed.

El cleared his throat and immediately the two adults parted. The two of them were flushed, their eyes wide. Will and Jonathan's mother looked frightened, as if she had caught herself doing something very wrong.

"El, honey," Joyce Byers smiled disconcerted, blurred lipstick. "H-hi, Mike. You're enjoying the party?"

"Not as much as you," El replied with a mischievous grin.

"El" Hopper scolded, his eyes falling on Mike and his cheeks flushed. "What are you two doing out here? The party is there. Your party is there, Ellie."

Mike opened his mouth and then fell silent realizing that Hopper had just called Ellie's. It was strange but at the same time it seemed right.

"I wanted that to show Mike, Hop."

Hopper did not look very happy. That? Were not they going out there to talk?

"You said you would show when everyone was together, to all your friends."

"I've changed my mind, cannot I?" El's smile became full of innocence and it made Mike feel himself floating. She was so beautiful. "Come on, Hop, it's no big deal."

Clearly reluctant, Hopper took a seriously-looking paper from his jacket and handed it to El. The girl still smiled and continued to do so even after Hopper and Joyce entered.

"I knew they would be together!" She exclaimed with a bright smile. "I told you, did not I?"

"Do you think they're dating?" Mike asked, still embarrassed. "Real dating?"

"Yeah. Hopper told me about it last night and asked if I was okay with it."

"You're?"

"Of course I am. I do not even give him two months to ask her to move in with us."

"So, Jonathan will be your brother? Will too?"

"I think so. I did not stop to think about it." She stopped talking and looked at him seriously. It was as if her brown eyes could see through his soul. "But we're not here to talk about Hop and Will's mother, right?"

Without adding anything, she guided him to sit on the small wooden staircase that connected a small garden to Hopper's house.

They were both in a comfortable silence. Okay, Mike, just hand it in. Take a deep breath, it's no big deal. But that thought did not soothe the brunet, it only made him push the present into El's arms with a rude uncharacteristic of him when he was about her. Choosing not to see her reaction, she looked away and ... She waited.

"Mike." The girl called, and he could not make out what the feeling was ringing in her voice. "That is..."

"Pathetic? I know. I'm really sorry, if you want, I can buy something else ..."

"It's beautiful, Mike." El interrupted. "That's so sweet of you. That's so cute, so funny."

Curious, Mike turned to her and found the girl holding the doll and looking at the teddy bear as if it were something precious. The doll was simple, not porcelain or as good material as Holly's dolls, and the teddy bear was not there either, since Mike's allowance had dropped considerably recently, but despite all this, El acted as if Mike had just present her with something ... something rare and definitely wonderful.

"I had a teddy bear in the lab, it was a bit rough, worn, old and they gave me to shut my mouth, but ... I never had a doll, you know." She stroked the doll's hair with a silly grin. "Dolls were not welcome in the lab."

He thought of a small Eleven, his hazel eyes wide, caught in a room in Hawkins's lab, receiving an old teddy bear for comfort. No doll sights. Just her, the third-hand teddy bear and a hard bed in a small, white room. It was a sad, horrible thought.

"I loved it." She buried her face in the brown hair of the doll, merry.
"This is one of the best gifts I could have received."

Mike was about to inquire what items were on his gift list when El, surprising him in a perfectly good way, leaned over and pressed his lips over hers. For the last few days she'd been doing it with a frequency that Mike was not very inclined to complain about.

Her lips were soft against his, warm in the right measure and ... And they had an absolutely pleasant taste of cherry. He loved cherries. Mike loved to kiss her and loved the confident attitude she was sketching.

"That was good, very good." El laughed at him as he extended to Mike the role that Jim Hopper both reluctant to intrude upon. "Look at this and tell me what you think?"

Still under the effect of El's kiss, Mike looked at the small letters that adorned the paper. He was slow to assimilate what was written on that paper ... No, it was not a simple role, it was something serious, something that came from the government. That was a birth certificate, the birth certificate of a girl named Ellie Jane Hopper.

Ellie ... Mike looked at her, stunned, as the truth became more and more clear in his mind. Hopper had called her for Ellie earlier and it had not been a mistake. Ellie was her name now; El was now officially the daughter of Jim Hopper, regardless of whether it was an Ives or not. Hopper was now officially her family.

"El, that's fantastic." He smiled at her. "You ... When did you choose that name?"

"I wanted to continue being called El, but I also wanted to be known as Jane then ..." She let go of it all, without stopping to breathe. She seemed finally to be putting out an excitement she had been holding for some time. "I want to continue being El, but I also want to be Jane, the girl that my mother would have created. Is that ... Can you understand or am I sounding crazy?"

"I can understand."

And he really could understand her point of view. She wanted to be the daughter of Terry Ives, Jane, but also wanted to remain who she was, the strong and fearless girl who lived in Hawkins. El knew of no use wanting to leave to be called that way when there was a clear reminder of his old life recorded on your wrist.

Mike did not say anything else, he did not have to say. He just stood there, staring at her until a question had arisen and began to torment her thoughts. It had been tormenting him for the last month, since she had been inside Will's head, since she had saved him the second time.

"El?" The girl stopped admiring the brown-haired doll and turned back to him. "Do you remember anything? You know, after getting inside Will's head and getting the thing out of him ... Do you remember anything?"

Do you remember talking to me? Remember to have talked to me at Supercom after saving Will? He kept asking mentally what he did not dare put into audible words.

A light breeze stirred the curly strands of El's hair. Her hair was getting longer.

"I do not remember anything, Mike, just feeling a lot of pain." She frowned at the doll. "I did something?"

Any hesitation that Mike might be feeling was gone when he found himself in the face of curiosity. He could not ask her that, and then get away from it.

"It's no big deal, El, it's just ... You kind of talked to me. You talked to me when you were supposed to be asleep."

A delicate blush settled on El's cheeks. She rarely blushed, it was him who did it.

"Oh, Jesus!" Moaned softly hugging the doll against her. "I cannot believe I did it."

"But how did you do that by being, you know, sleeping."

El, still flushed, put the doll inside the gift box and took Mike's hand. Her hand was trembling, as if that movement of taking his hand made her nervous. But that was not true. El had already taken his hand countless times and she had definitely never been shy about it. So what was it?

"Promise you will not freak out, Mike? You promise not to scream or scare?"

Mike, who would always give in to whatever El's request might be, squeezed her hand in search of security. She looked so uncertain, so frightened that it reminded him of the night they'd found her lost in the woods.

"I promise, El. I'll be quiet until you tell me to do otherwise."

"Okay, so ... Close your eyes, okay? Try to keep your breathing calm, this will make it easier for me and you."

Confused, but unintentionally El contest, Mike obeyed. He held his breath calmly and kept his eyes closed even as the world around him swayed for a few seconds.

Suddenly Mike was enveloped by a soft darkness, sitting on a frighteningly flooded floor. Somehow he knew he was still sitting on Hopper's staircase, but that he was also there, in that darkness. He was, literally, between the two worlds.

He looked around and immediately faced El. She looked pale under the faint, almost nonexistent light that existed there, her eyes were wide and filled with ... Uncertainty. Mike could feel her uncertainty. He could really feel what she was feeling.

The real world came back to him like a slap in the face. The darkness did not exist anymore and he was back in the real world. Flustered, he opened his eyes to find El, still sitting beside him, wiping the blood from his nose.

"What ... El? What was that?" He tried to remain calm as he bombarded her with questions. "Wait, that was how you spoke to me that night? That's how you talk to me at Supercom?"

The girl nodded and Mike felt her curls tickle his neck. She was shy, embarrassed to assume that.

"I do some things unconsciously, without realizing it and I think that applies to what happened. I'm sorry if I bothered you."

"No, you did not bother me, I just got curious since you were asleep. It was weird but also very cool."

"You think that's cool?"

"Everything in you is legal, El." He smiled, pleased with himself. He had just praised a girl, the girl he liked, and had not blushed. It was a breakthrough. "Absolutely everything."

Taking courage, the brunette wrapped his arms around El. She was small, too small for someone who was so well cared for. Compared to him, El was a tiny thing. Maybe in time she would get bigger, taller. But if she did not stay there, she had no problem, Mike would always like her regardless of her stature or anything else.

Nothing would change what Mike felt for her. Nothing and no one. Even at thirteen, Mike knew that what he felt for El was something true and unchangeable.

Mike suppressed a laugh at the thought that in 1883, that time of year, he was locked in the basement, pretending that he was doing something when he was actually whining about El's supposed death. And to think that he had come to think that she was really dead. And now here he was, sitting beside her, smelling the pleasant scent she exuded. That was still unbelievable.

The fact that El liked him was still unbelievable. Mike always suspected he would find unbelievable fact of El like it, someone as common as it when she was a wilderness of possibilities before you. But if she had chosen to stay with him, who was he to oppose her? As long as El wanted it he would be there for her.